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LESBIAN LIFE WORKSHOP

May 25, 1992

Introduction to workshop

- why we do this workshop
- focus on lesbians
- not a sexuality workshop
- identifying as giving up privilege

Explanations and Definitions

- homophobia, lesbophobia, heterosexism, compulsory heterosexuality

Heterosexual Privilege

- brainstorm

Herstory

- lesbians of colour
- white lesbians

Lesbian Culture

- lesbian communities and org's in Van (VLC, ALOV, BLC, Gazebo, Queer Nation)
- lesbian events (Dykes on the Drive, Int'l Lesbian Week, Michigan)
- lesbian bars, bookstores
- lesbian symbols (labrys, black triangle, joined women symbols)
- not all lesbians participate

Lesbian Relationships

- different dynamics (Monog vs. nonmonog, S-M, butch/femme)
- idea of utopia
- conflicts -being 'out', small community
- battering, sexual assault

Homophobia

- diff. impact on lesbians and gay men
- gay and lesbian bashing (unprotected by Human Right Act)
- disowned by families, custody issues

Questions, Comments

Handout:

WHAT IS HOMOPHOBIA ???

- Have you ever wished that gay men and lesbians weren't so blatant or open about being gay?
- Have you ever been embarrassed by another person's openly gay or lesbian behavior?
- Have you ever expected a gay man or lesbian to change or modify his/her public identity or affectionate habits or modes of dress in order to work in an organization?
- Have you ever looked at a gay man or lesbian and automatically thought of his/her sexuality, rather than seeing him/her as a whole complex person?
- Have you ever failed to be supportive when a gay or lesbian friend is sad about a quarrel or breakup with a lover?
- Have you ever changed your seat in a meeting or movie theater because you thought the person sitting next to you was gay or lesbian?
- Have you ever thought that you could identify gay men or lesbians by their appearance or behavior?
- Have you ever worried about having a gay/lesbian professor?
- Have you ever worried about the possibility of being assigned to a gay/lesbian roommate?
- Have you ever avoided social contact with an openly gay/lesbian because you were afraid other people might think you were gay?
- Have you ever felt repulsed by public displays of affection between two gay men or women, but accepted a similar public display between a heterosexual couple as "nice"?
- Have you ever thought that if a gay man/lesbian touches you, he/she is making sexual advances?
- Have you ever used the terms "gay," "lesbian," "queer," "dyke," "fag," or "straight" as accusatory?
- Have you ever felt that gay people and lesbians are too outspoken about gay rights?
- Have you ever felt that gay men and lesbians are "different" or "mysterious" in some way?

I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities

Whenever I come to Medgar Evers College I always feel a thrill of anticipation and delight because it feels like coming home, like talking to family, having a chance to speak about things that are very important to me with people who matter the most. And this is particularly true whenever I talk at the Women's Center. But, as with all families, we sometimes find it difficult to deal constructively with the genuine differences between us and to recognize that unity does not require that we be identical to each other. Black women are not one great vat of homogenized chocolate milk. We have many different faces, and we do not have to become each other in order to work together.

It is not easy for me to speak here with you as a Black Lesbian feminist, recognizing that some of the ways in which I identify my-

self make it difficult for you to hear me. But meeting across difference always requires mutual stretching, and until you *can* hear me as a Black Lesbian feminist, our strengths will not be truly available to each other as Black women.

Because I feel it is urgent that we not waste each other's resources, that we recognize each sister on her own terms so that we may better work together toward our mutual survival, I speak here about heterosexism and homophobia, two grave barriers to organizing among Black women. And so that we have a common language between us, I would like to define some of the terms I use: *Heterosexism*—a belief in the inherent superiority of one form of loving over all others and thereby the right to dominance; *Homophobia*—a terror surrounding feelings of love for members of the same sex and thereby a hatred of those feelings in others.

In the 1960s, when liberal white people decided that they didn't want to appear racist, they wore dashikis, and danced Black, and ate Black, and even married Black, but they did not want to feel Black or think Black, so they never even questioned the textures of their daily living (why should flesh-colored band-aids always be pink?) and then they wondered, "Why are those Black folks always taking offense so easily at the least little thing? Some of our best friends are Black . . ."

Well, it is not necessary for some of your best friends to be Lesbian, although some of them probably are, no doubt. But it is necessary for you to stop oppressing me through false judgment. I do not want you to ignore my identity, nor do I want you to make it an insurmountable barrier between our sharing of strengths.

When I say I am a Black feminist, I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my Blackness as well as my womanness, and therefore my struggles on both these fronts are inseparable.

When I say I am a Black Lesbian, I mean I am a woman whose primary focus of loving, physical as well as emotional, is directed to women. It does not mean I hate men. Far from it. The harshest attacks I have ever heard against Black men come from those women who are intimately bound to them and cannot free themselves from a subservient and silent position. I would never presume to speak about Black men the way I have heard some of my straight sisters talk about the men they are attached to. And of course that concerns me, because it reflects a situation of noncommunication in the heterosexual Black community that is far more truly threatening than the existence of Black Lesbians.

What does this have to do with Black women organizing?

I have heard it said—usually behind my back—that Black Lesbians are not normal. But what is normal in this deranged society by which we are all trapped? I remember, and so do many of you, when being Black was considered *not normal*, when they talked about us in whispers, tried to paint us, lynch us, bleach us, ignore us, pretend we did not exist. We called that racism.

I have heard it said that Black Lesbians are a threat to the Black family. But when 50 percent of children born to Black women are born out of wedlock, and 30 percent of all Black families are headed by women without husbands, we need to broaden and redefine what we mean by *family*.

I have heard it said that Black Lesbians will mean the death of the race. Yet Black Lesbians bear children in exactly the same way other women bear children, and a Lesbian household is simply another kind of family. Ask my son and daughter.

The terror of Black Lesbians is buried in that deep inner place where we have been taught to fear all difference—to kill it or ignore it. Be assured: loving women is not a communicable disease. You don't catch it like the common cold. Yet the one accusation

that seems to render even the most vocal straight Black woman totally silent and ineffective is the suggestion that she might be a Black Lesbian.

If someone says you're Russian and you know you're not, you don't collapse into stunned silence. Even if someone calls you a bigamist, or a childbeater, and you know you're not, you don't crumple into bits. You say it's not true and keep on printing the posters. But let anyone, particularly a Black man, accuse a straight Black woman of being a Black *Lesbian*, and right away that sister becomes immobilized, as if that is the most horrible thing she could be, and must at all costs be proven false. That is homophobia. It is a waste of woman energy, and it puts a terrible weapon into the hands of your enemies to be used against you to silence you, to keep you docile and in line. It also serves to keep us isolated and apart.

I have heard it said that Black Lesbians are not political, that we have not been and are not involved in the struggles of Black people. But when I taught Black and Puerto Rican students writing at City College in the SEEK program in the sixties I was a Black Lesbian. I was a Black Lesbian when I helped organize and fight for the Black Studies Department of John Jay College. And because I was fifteen years younger then and less sure of myself, at one crucial moment I yielded to pressures that said I should step back for a Black man even though I knew him to be a serious error of choice, and I did, and he was. But I was a Black Lesbian then.

When my girlfriends and I went out in the car one July 4th night after fireworks with cans of white spray paint and our kids asleep in the back seat, one of us staying behind to keep the motor running and watch the kids while the other two worked our way down the suburban New Jersey street, spraying white paint over the black jockey statues, and their little red jackets, too, we were Black Lesbians.

When I drove through the Mississippi delta to Jackson in 1968 with a group of Black students from Tougaloo, another car full of redneck kids trying to bump us off the road all the way back into town, I was a Black Lesbian.

When I weaned my daughter in 1963 to go to Washington in August to work in the coffee tents along with Lena Horne, making coffee for the marshalls because that was what most Black women did in the 1963 March on Washington, I was a Black Lesbian.

When I taught a poetry workshop at Tougaloo, a small Black college in Mississippi, where white rowdies shot up the edge of campus every night, and I felt the joy of seeing young Black poets find their voices and power through words in our mutual growth, I was a Black Lesbian. And there are strong Black poets today who date their growth and awareness from those workshops.

When Yoli and I cooked curried chicken and beans and rice and took our extra blankets and pillows up the hill to the striking students occupying buildings at City College in 1969, demanding open admissions and the right to an education, I was a Black Lesbian. When I walked through the midnight hallways of Lehman College that same year, carrying Midol and Kotex pads for the young Black radical women taking part in the action, and we tried to persuade them that their place in the revolution was not ten paces behind Black men, that spreading their legs to the guys on the tables in the cafeteria was not a revolutionary act no matter what the brothers said, I was a Black Lesbian. When I picketed for Welfare Mothers' Rights, and against the enforced sterilization of young Black girls, when I fought institutionalized racism in the New York City schools, I was a Black Lesbian.

But you did not know it because we did not identify ourselves, so now you can say that Black Lesbians and Gay men have nothing to do with the struggles of the Black Nation.

And I am not alone.

When you read the words of Langston Hughes you are reading the words of a Black Gay man. When you read the words of Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Angelina Weld Grimké, poets of the Harlem Renaissance, you are reading the words of Black Lesbians. When you listen to the life-affirming voices of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, you are hearing Black Lesbian women. When you see the plays and read the words of Lorraine Hansberry, you are reading the words of a woman who loved women deeply.

Today, Lesbians and Gay men are some of the most active and engaged members of Art Against Apartheid, a group which is making visible and immediate our cultural responsibilities against the tragedy of South Africa. We have organizations such as the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, Dykes Against Racism Everywhere, and Men of All Colors Together, all of which are committed to and engaged in antiracist activity.

Homophobia and heterosexism mean you allow yourselves to be robbed of the sisterhood and strength of Black Lesbian women because you are afraid of being called a Lesbian yourself. Yet we share so many concerns as Black women, so much work to be done. The urgency of the destruction of our Black children and the theft of young Black minds are joint urgencies. Black children shot down or doped up on the streets of our cities are priorities for all of us. The fact of Black women's blood flowing with grim regularity in the streets and living rooms of Black communities is not a Black Lesbian rumor. It is sad statistical truth. The fact that there is widening and dangerous lack of communication around our differences between Black women and men is not a Black Lesbian plot. It is a reality that is starkly clarified as we see our young people becoming more and more uncaring of each other. Young Black boys believing that they can define their manhood between a sixth grade

girl's legs, growing up believing that Black women and girls are the fitting target for their justifiable furies rather than the racist structures grinding us all into dust, these are not Black Lesbian myths. These are sad realities of Black communities today and of immediate concern to us all. We cannot afford to waste each other's energies in our common battles.

What does homophobia mean? It means that high-powered Black women are told it is not safe to attend a Conference on the Status of Women in Nairobi simply because we are Lesbians. It means that in a political action, you rob yourselves of the vital insight and energies of political women such as Betty Powell and Barbara Smith and Gwendolyn Rogers and Raymina Mays and Robin Christian and Yvonne Flowers. It means another instance of the divide-and-conquer routine.

How do we organize around our differences, neither denying them nor blowing them up out of proportion?

The first step is an effort of will on your part. Try to remember to keep certain facts in mind. Black Lesbians are not apolitical. We have been a part of every freedom struggle within this country. Black Lesbians are not a threat to the Black family. Many of us have families of our own. We are not white, and we are not a disease. We are women who love women. This does not mean we are going to assault your daughters in an alley on Nostrand Avenue. It does not mean we are about to attack you if we pay you a compliment on your dress. It does not mean we only think about sex, any more than you only think about sex.

Even if you *do* believe any of these stereotypes about Black Lesbians, begin to practice *acting* like you don't believe them. Just as racist stereotypes are the problem of the white people who believe them, so also are homophobic stereotypes the problem of the heterosexuals who believe them. In other words, those stereotypes

are yours to solve, not mine, and they are a terrible and wasteful barrier to our working together. I am not your enemy. We do not have to become each other's unique experiences and insights in order to share what we have learned through our particular battles for survival as Black women. . . .

There was a poster in the 1960s that was very popular: HE'S NOT BLACK, HE'S MY BROTHER! It used to infuriate me because it implied that the two were mutually exclusive—he couldn't be both brother and Black. Well, I do not want to be tolerated, nor misnamed. I want to be recognized.

I am a Black Lesbian, and I *am* your sister.

Appendix C. Heterosexuality Questionnaire

The following list of questions has been circulating among the gay and lesbian communities for some time. We gratefully acknowledge the anonymous person(s) who created it and present it here as examples of inverting the question. (See page 21.)

1. What do you think caused your heterosexuality?
2. When and how did you first decide you were a heterosexual?
3. Is it possible your heterosexuality is just a phase you might grow out of?
4. Is it possible your heterosexuality stems from a neurotic fear of others of the same sex?
5. If you've never slept with a person of the same sex and enjoyed it, is it possible that all you need is a good gay lover?
6. To whom have you disclosed your heterosexual tendencies? How did they react?
7. Why do you heterosexuals feel compelled to seduce others into your lifestyle?
8. Why do you insist on flaunting your heterosexuality? Can't you just be what you are and keep it quiet?
9. Would you want your children to be heterosexual, knowing the problems they'd face?
10. A disproportionate majority of child molesters are heterosexual. Do you consider it safe to expose your children to heterosexual teachers?
11. Even with all the societal support marriage receives, the divorce rate is spiralling. Why are there so few stable relationships among heterosexuals?
12. Why do heterosexuals place so much emphasis on sex?
13. Considering the menace of overpopulation, how could the human race survive if everyone was heterosexual like you?
14. Could you trust a heterosexual therapist to be objective? Don't you fear s/he might be inclined to influence you in the direction of her/his leaning?
15. How can you become a whole person if you limit yourself to compulsive, exclusive heterosexuality? Shouldn't you at least try to develop your natural, healthy homosexual potential?
16. There seems to be very few happy heterosexuals. Techniques have been developed to help you change if you really want to. Have you considered aversion therapy?

Defining

Purpose To give a working definition of the word lesbian as we use it in the workshop and to introduce the concept of lesbian oppression.

Present a definition of lesbian, such as:

Open discussion for a few minutes to get general agreement on a definition. Because our understanding of lesbianism is based on our lives and experiences, heterosexual women are not in a position to create a definition.

Summarize some of the themes of the *Remembering* round and say that although our conditioning is important we cannot base our actions on lies and myths. Say that the purpose of this section is to explore the reality of living as a lesbian in this culture.

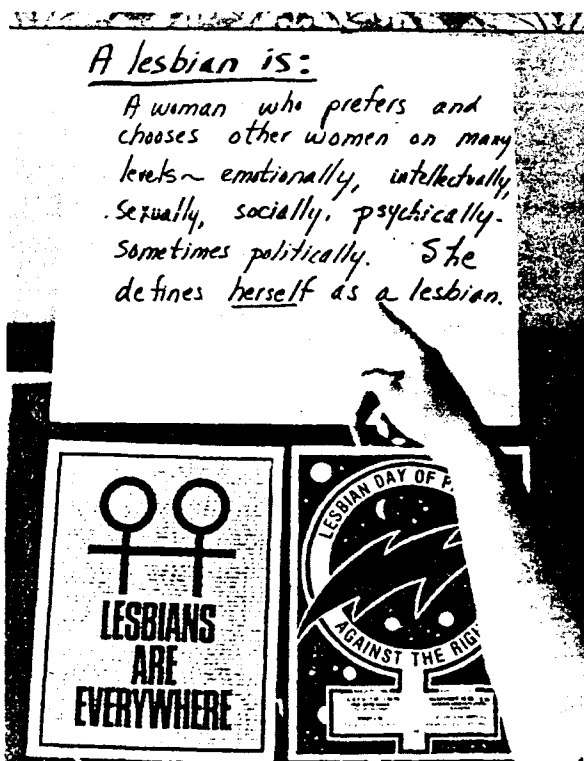
What is a lesbian? What is the reality of lesbianism? **A lesbian is a woman who prefers other women on many levels: sexually, emotionally, intellectually, psychically—and who defines herself as a lesbian.**

The oppression of lesbians shows itself in many ways. We are invisible and invalidated. History books make no mention of us and we rarely appear in fiction. When we are mentioned in psychology or sociology we are seen as deviant or ill. The media rarely gives us images of ourselves, and never positive images. A young woman growing up has no chance of receiving the information and support she needs in order to see lesbianism as a valid life choice.

Images of lesbianism in both popular myth and “objective” scholarly writings portray us as evil, sick, shameful, corrupting and exclusively sexual. We are presented to ourselves—even from the more “enlightened” viewpoints—as tragically doomed to promiscuity, alcohol, drugs, violence, despair and suicide.

These stereotypical images reinforce negative attitudes about lesbianism and sanction more overt forms of oppression. Lesbians are ridiculed, harassed, verbally abused, shunned. As lesbians we are disowned by our families, evicted from our homes, fired from our jobs. Our children are taken from us. We are sexually assaulted, beaten, raped. We are incarcerated in mental hospitals and psychiatric institutions.

We have no civil rights and consequently no legal recourse. Legally, custody cases must be



Photo/ Billie Carroll

decided "in the best interests of the child" but lesbian mothers are usually automatically branded as "unfit" regardless of the quality of the mother/child relationship. Choice of sexual orientation is not protected by Human Rights codes (except in Québec) or most union contracts, so there is no protection against discrimination in housing or employment.

For more specifics on oppression, facilitators should use examples from the *Remembering* exercises or from your lives. Refer to *Organizing for Change* too!

Choosing

Purpose To present a positive image of lesbianism; to introduce the concept of lesbianism as choosing to love women, including ourselves.

Discuss why women would make the choice to love women. Facilitators may speak from their own lives, their own positive experiences, their experiences of loving women, coming-out, working on relationships, growing. Alternately the facilitator may read:

Why then would any woman choose a lifestyle that involved all this? Living as a lesbian means for many of us living an integration between our beliefs and our lives. It means questioning all our concepts of what women are, in all areas of our lives. It means that it is all right to be tough and assertive and physically strong and it is also all right to be soft and to be cuddled.

It means that we have a chance to be both nurturing and nurtured, giver and taker, lover and loved. It means feeling part of a great wave of woman energy and woman effort that is creating a better way of relating to each other, our children and the earth. And for many of us it means that we fell in love with a woman and that the strength and joy and the pain and the growing of that loving was the impetus to define ourselves as lesbians.

As lesbians we've always known that each of us is a woman who does not want to depend upon a man, who does not even want to de-

pend upon another woman—upon other women, yes, in a collective sense, for that's part of our dream too, but not upon any other single person; either consciously or unconsciously we've known that we have in us a strong tendency toward self-governance and a desire to give up the habit of governing other people; we've always known that we want our own self-reliance and that of every woman. For sure, very few, if any of us, have gotten "there" yet: that's no surprise in a society where we've been brought up to hate our selves. Even to begin to love our self, a woman, in a woman-hating society that has tens of thousands of years of history behind its misogyny is quite an accomplishment.

—Sally Miller Gearhart, *Our Right to Love*

Facilitators invite discussion about the material presented. Ask women why they have chosen to be either lesbians or heterosexual. Check how women are doing emotionally, intellectually. See whether a break is needed now.

Myths

Purpose To examine the social and cultural stereotypes of lesbianism and to explore the reasons for the existence of the myths. Women have a chance to listen to information which will help to make sense of the emotions we have all just shared. The myths section is funny in parts and the laughter is a welcome release.

The myth section should be presented in a dramatized manner emphasizing humour and absurdity. Facilitators can alternate myth/reply. It is important that the myths be presented in such a way that women do not think they are being judged or stupid for believing such things. We have found that facilitators talking about "when we believed that lesbians would attack us in washrooms etc." is useful in allowing women to hear that we all believed these lies and that we have to work hard to stop believing them. If the workshop is with women who identify as lesbians it is even more important for facilitators to stress that all of us—even lesbians!—were taught these myths and that in our daily lives we often act out beliefs that we think we don't have.

This section examines the myths about lesbianism we have all been brought up to believe. These myths are lies and these lies have a purpose.

Myth: An invented story or belief which has no basis in fact and is used to explain phenomena; it reflects the attitudes and values held and passed on by the majority of people in a culture.

All of us who grow up in this culture absorb myths about lesbians; they give us a stereotypical image of what lesbians look like, how lesbians live, what jobs lesbians hold, what lesbians think and feel, how and with whom lesbians make love, etc. We learn that any woman who even partially fits this stereotype must be a lesbian, and conversely that in order to be a lesbian you **must** fit this stereotype. We learn that lesbian behaviour is shameful and that lesbians are to be ridiculed and despised. These myths depict lesbians as "different", "other" or "not women". It is obvious that unacceptable female behaviour constitutes lesbian behaviour. It is harder to realize that with these myths we are also being taught what constitutes **acceptable** female behaviour.

1 The first group of myths has to do with male/female roles:

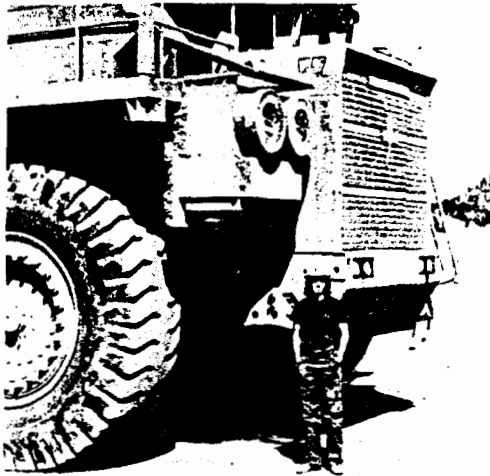
Lesbians are not real women This myth is the primary one. It is the underlying myth about lesbians. It is the basis for many of the other myths. What is it really saying? Obviously lesbians are biologically female, but are not seen as "real" women. A "real" woman must therefore be both biologically female **and** be fulfilling the traditional female role.

Lesbians want to be men If lesbians are not "real" women they must want to be men. After all, what else is there?

Lesbians are male egos trapped in a female body; lesbians are victims of a confused sexual identity. Who is confused? Lesbians are women who love women.

Lesbians hate children; lesbians are afraid of childbirth. Since all "real" women love, nurture and want children and since lesbians are not "real" women, lesbians must hate children . . .

Lesbians wear male clothing What is male clothing? It is sturdy, warm, and comfortable. Female clothing, on the other hand, is usually expensive and flimsy. It is designed to decorate



Facilitators can alternate reading each myth.

us rather than to protect us from the elements or allow us to move freely in it. In fact, a lot of women's clothing is physically restraining and even crippling—girdles, high heels, straight skirts, tight pants, and so on. The major reason to differentiate between male and female clothing is to make the difference between men and women readily apparent. If men and women looked the same how would men know who to treat as inferior? Hire as secretaries? Rape?

Lesbians are all truck drivers Absurd.
There aren't enough trucks for all of us.

2 The second group of myths involves causes and explanations.

- Lesbianism is a phase.
- Lesbianism is a sickness (communicable).
- Lesbianism is a crime against nature.
- Lesbianism is a sin against God.
- Lesbianism is caused by a genetic defect.
- Lesbians are ugly.
- Lesbians are afraid of men.
- Lesbians hate men.
- Lesbians can't get a man.
- Lesbians have had bad experiences with men (what woman hasn't).
- Lesbians just need a good fuck.
- Lesbianism is a way of avoiding the responsibility of a family.
- Lesbianism is caused by a dominant mother/passive father.
- Lesbianism is caused by a dominant father/passive mother.
- Lesbianism is caused by too close an identification with the father.
- Lesbianism is caused by too close an identification with the mother.
- Lesbianism is caused by the lack of a father.
- Lesbianism is caused by the lack of a mother.
- Lesbianism is caused by excessive sibling rivalry/jealousy.
- Lesbianism is caused by too much aloneness/no sibling interaction.
- Lesbianism is caused by . . .
- Seems miraculous that anyone ever grows up heterosexual!

These myths all assume that heterosexuality is the only normal, natural preordained way for mature, responsible human beings to live. Anything else (lesbianism) is unnatural and sick, and must have a cause.

There is no historical, anthropological, sociological, psychological, or biological basis for this "assumption of heterosexuality". In our society, heterosexuality is a cultural institution which forms the foundation for social patterns of marriage, childrearing, division of labour and property inheritance. Heterosexuality ordains the social roles of both men and women.

Thus, homosexuality is not merely a choice of life styles, but a rejection of and a threat to male/female roles.

Homosexuality must, therefore, have a cause so it can be explained away, cured, punished, discouraged . . .

3 The third group of myths has to do with sex.

Lesbians are obsessed with sex.

Lesbians are washroom invaders.

Lesbians are wildly promiscuous.

Lesbians lie in wait for any woman who crosses their path.

Lesbians are child molesters.

Lesbians are insanely jealous and possessive and beat each other up with broken beer bottles.

Lesbians lead romantic sexual lives and do nothing but make love.

Lesbians want the pleasures of sexual activity without paying the price. (Right!)

These myths tell us absolutely nothing about lesbians; in fact, they are out and out lies. They do tell us, however, how our society defines women. Women serve two major functions: as sexual objects for men and to nurture and serve men and children. Since lesbians are not "real" women and so do not exist in order to nurture and serve men and children, lesbians must be primarily and obsessively sexual. These myths reflect a fear of women's sexuality—voracious, all-consuming and destructive unless controlled and defined by a man.

These myths also connect lesbianism with aggression, domination and sexuality linked with violence. In reality, it is men in our culture who commit these acts. It is men who molest, assault and rape. Creating a myth of lesbians as more to be feared than men keeps women from identifying as or with lesbians, keeps women dependent upon male "protection", and keeps women securely confined to their traditional female roles. Finally, these myths devalue lesbianism by defining it as irresponsible, solely pleasure-oriented and trivial.

4 There is a fourth group of myths which has become increasingly popular in recent years. These are myths which are often heard in "enlightened" circles such as the women's movement or other political groups. We have used the example of the women's movement throughout but the myths live in any movement for social change.

Lesbians are infiltrating the movement. It's not fair, lesbians have nothing to do but go to meetings. They do not have responsibilities like families, children, like the rest of us. Lesbians are only a constituency in cities. There are no rural lesbians and lesbians are a small minority.

These statements reinforce the image of lesbians as "not women" or "different than women". They are untrue. We live everywhere, and not only do we have the responsibilities of families, children, and jobs, but like all single mothers and women, we often bear our responsibilities totally alone. Our oppression is a more obvious and extreme form of the oppression faced by all women in our society. The women's movement is our movement and our politics and perspective are valuable. We have a right to visibility, recognition and support by any group committed to social change.

There should be no labels, we are all human beings. Lesbianism is personal, not political. We have already dealt with lesbianism and we are all personally comfortable with lesbians; now it is time to go on to something else. Lesbianism is a red herring.

Some human beings have more power and privilege than other human beings. Labels like: "Woman", "Indian", "Lesbian" reflect real

differences in opportunity and privilege. When all people are equal in privilege and power we can discard labels. Labels are not just names: there is the implicit threat of punishment attached. As long as lesbians can be fired from their jobs, lose their children, lose friends and families, lack the protection of even basic civil rights, then lesbianism is not just a personal matter.

As long as any woman can suffer political and legal harassment for how she chooses to live her life, then every woman faces the same threat.

Rural women, native women, poor women . . . are not ready to talk about or deal with lesbianism.

This myth is prevalent among people who are neither rural, native, nor poor. It reinforces the myth that all lesbians are urban, white and middle class.

This myth also defines lesbianism as an issue of relevance to a privileged class only. It denies the realities of women who do not share that experience of privilege, and who are lesbians. This is condescending and arrogant and ignores the fact that individual women in this culture face many forms of oppression—class, race and age, for example. A lesbian who is non-white and/or working class and/or living outside of the lesbian community of the cities experiences oppression in a different way. The myth relieves us of our responsibility as oppressors.

We will alienate too many women/people if we talk about “that”. Yes, lesbianism is a crucial, valid, feminist issue and we are concerned but there is too much at stake right now. We may lose our funding. There is a right wing backlash and we will lose our credibility.

Fear of losing social credibility has operated to keep lesbians in the women's movement invisible and silent, and keeps the women's movement as a whole from “going too far”. Lesbians face personal, legal, economic and political discrimination every day and in every area of our lives. Anyone openly supporting lesbian rights is likely to face similar punishment and harassment. When the women's movement incorporates and acts from a les-

bian/feminist analysis, we may well alienate some people, lose credibility, lose funding. Every time we hold a belief that is at all different from that held by the majority we alienate some people. At some point, we have to be prepared to back up our beliefs with action, with a commitment to grow and change, with a commitment to see that the people we come in contact with grow and change. Change is never easy. As feminists we must stand together, we must be strong, and we must refuse to be divided and conquered. It comes down to a choice between being accepted and acceptable and actually living, in our day to day lives, what we profess to believe.

The consequences of being a lesbian in this society are severe. The consequences of associating with or supporting lesbians are also severe. But turning on each other, denying and betraying, blaming and fighting is much more destructive to the women's movement than any amount of bad publicity or lack of funding. Working together to create a society where no woman is oppressed is our process and our goal.

—B.C. Federation of Women,
Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee

You can't be a feminist if you aren't a lesbian. Feminism is a perspective on how the world functions and an analysis of how and why women are oppressed. Being a feminist requires more than identifying as a woman; it requires both an analysis of the oppression of women and a commitment to applying this analysis to all facets of personal and social existence. We believe that a feminist analysis includes an analysis of the oppression of lesbians and the role of the institution of heterosexuality in reinforcing the oppression of all women. We believe that heterosexuality, which traditionally means male domination over women, is expected of us and even forced on us. It is not offered as **one** of many life choices.

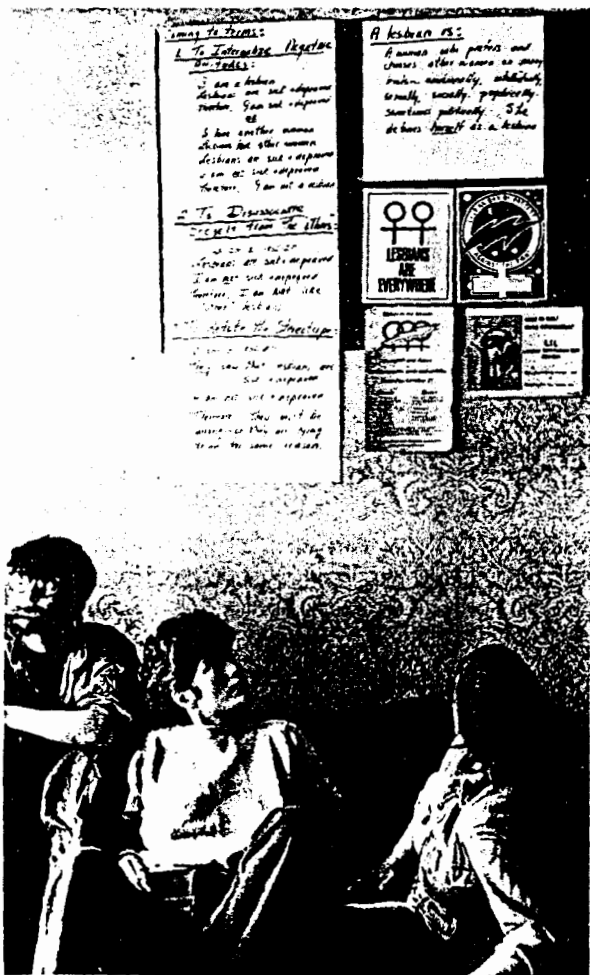
As long as this condition exists, women have a responsibility to fight against the institution of compulsory heterosexuality in all areas of our lives, regardless of whom we choose as friends, work associates, or lovers. Being a feminist

does not mean being a lesbian. It does mean working to identify lesbian oppression as a specific part of the oppression of all women and struggling against heterosexism in all areas of one's life.

Lesbianism is easy. Women always understand each other. Lesbians have wonderful sex lives. Lesbians all support each other and no one is ever alone and unloved. Lesbians are all so strong and so free and so brave and so wonderful.

There are some myths about lesbianism which at first glance seem positive.

These myths are just as untrue as the rest. Loving women is many things but not, on the whole, easy. We do not always understand each other. As women we have all been taught to hate ourselves. Our rights to define our own self-image, our personal power, our sexuality, have been taken from us. For some of us the reality of living as lesbians has involved much pain. Part of the pain is because we believed that loving women would be just marvelous and what do we do when the sex is not wonderful and the perfect relationship turns horrible and the women in our lives are confused and anguished? We **can** be clear and brave and strong and unafraid and loving. Many of us are learning and growing and feeling positive about ourselves in ways we would never have believed possible. But we are changing through time and work and commitment. It did not—and does not—happen automatically upon falling in love with a woman or naming ourselves lesbian. Rita Mae Brown says it well: *None of this is easy. Becoming a lesbian does not make you instantly pure, perpetually happy and decidedly revolutionary.*



Photo/ Sarah Davidson