

LESBIANS: A DISADVANTAGED MINORITY

The Campaign Against Moral Persecution, and homosexuals in general, view homosexuality as an alternative life style or another way in which a person lives his or her life. Rejected most strongly are those myths that consider homosexuals to be sick, dirty, deviant, perverted or any of the other negative terms that our society attaches to homosexuality.

It is the contention of C.A.M.P. that lesbians are discriminated against in a number of ways, both overtly and covertly. Much of the discrimination occurs because they are lesbians; some because they are women. I have used the term "disadvantaged" in the heading because it includes not only situations in which actual discrimination occurs, but also the more subtle, less obvious societal situations in which being a lesbian puts a woman in a negative light: an example of the former might be dismissal from employment because of one's lesbianism; and of the latter, the lesbian's fear of exposure in case of rejection by family or friends.

Discrimination of lesbians and lesbian relationships occurs in two basic ways: they are either ignored or negated. The lesbian is aware of being ignored every time she fills out a form which requires her to state her marital status. If she has been living with someone for any length of time (as the majority are) she knows she does not fit into the "single" category. On the hand her "marriage" is not accepted legally. In other words she is in a no-man's land. The term "defacto" would probably be appropriate if it were available on all forms. However even if it were, it is doubtful if many lesbians would use it, especially where it involved giving their partner's name. The reasons for this are firstly, fear (usually realistic) of loss of employment or of children because one is known to be a lesbian; and secondly, lesbians are themselves so often enculturated with the picture society perpetuates of a lesbian (e.g. a sick pervert) that they believe they are bad and so are ashamed to admit to being homosexual.

Society ignores the lesbian in other ways. For example, until recently homosexuality was never discussed in schools. Even now, with the existence of sex education courses, the focus is invariably on male homosexuality.

Girls are never told that they may find as much, if not more, happiness and satisfaction in a homosexual relationship as in a heterosexual one. The majority of lesbians have had to find this out for themselves the hard way: knowing they were different but not understanding how, dating many men in order to try and meet one they were attracted to, marrying because it was expected of them and then later learning of their homosexual feelings etc etc. No matter what aspect of our culture you examine, whether it be literature, the media or whatever, the assumption is always that a girl or woman is heterosexual. Thus an estimated 5-28% of the general population is being continually ignored.

The group probably most affected by this state of affairs is the young homosexual. The school-age lesbian invariably goes through a period in which she knows she is different but finds it difficult to say how. Because of the general taboo on the subject of female homosexuality it never occurs to her that she may be a lesbian. She may never have even heard of it; and if she has she knows she couldn't possibly be one of ... those! Having got beyond this and figured out that she may be homosexual, the young lesbian then faces the problem of having no avenues open for her to test this out; no clubs, social gatherings etc. that are available to the heterosexual teenager. What she finds out, in effect, is that her presence in society is totally ignored.

The ways in which lesbians and lesbian relationships are negated are more obvious.

Lesbians often get dismissed from their employment because of their sexual orientation. More devastating than this however, is the fear most lesbians have of losing their job. This prompts them to invent boyfriends and dates and generally put on a

heterosexual front. One girl I know who has a position of some responsibility with ten girls working under her was so fearful of losing her job that she changed her hairstyle and way of dress to "look more feminine" and so become less detectable. The concept of having two identities is something that the majority of lesbians have learnt to live with. Unfortunately not all are strong enough to cope with the strain of a dual identity. Employment in the Forces provides the clearest example of the difficulties faced by lesbians. Against all facts to the contrary, the myth still persists that homosexuals are security risks: any girl found to be a lesbian is usually discharged instantly. Those girls known to me that are in the Forces are so adept at disguising their true selves that one could almost make a joke of it and suggest that they should make good undercover agents. My concern, however, is for the cost that such a life-style must have on the lesbian's self respect, and strength of character.

Lesbians also find discrimination in the legal field. This primarily stems from society's non-recognition of the relationship between two women. In practical terms this means that a couple are not considered each other's next of kin. Wills, and inheritance, superannuation and pension benefits, visiting rights in hospitals, housing loans, to name a few, are all sources of contention for the lesbian. For example, a fear that most lesbians have is that they may be taken ill necessitating hospital treatment. Since legally a lesbian is regarded as "single" her parents are taken as next of kin. The lesbian partner may therefore be refused visiting rights. Most of us have seen this happen enough times to know that our fears are justified. Wills are another area in which parents may override a lesbian partner. So too are pension schemes where the lesbian partner, not recognised as next of kin, does not qualify as beneficiary. Housing loans and most bank loans are refused to lesbians on the grounds that they are single women. This is obviously discrimination against women rather than lesbians. However, a lesbian couple may be just as eager to set up a home as a heterosexual couple and in this sense there is a clear demarcation between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

Lesbian mothers are a group within the homophile community that experience a unique set of problems. Not only do they have the strain of hiding their lesbian identity, but also the fear of losing their children. There are many examples overseas (Australian lesbians have not yet come to this level of openness) of a husband gaining custody of the children on grounds that his wife was not a fit mother because of her lesbianism. Within C.A.M.P. at least $\frac{1}{4}$ of the women's group are married women most still living in the marital situation and capably bringing up families. It is impossible to accept that upon exposure such capability would somehow be reduced. Fear of loss of children as well as fear of rejection by them should they become aware of their mother's homosexuality puts the lesbian mother in a position of great vulnerability in terms of threats of exposure.

Lesbian mothers suffer from enculturation of society's stigma towards homosexuals as much as unmarried lesbians. Fear of exposure, lack of self-acceptance and feelings of insecurity often prompt these women to remain in a marriage that may be totally unsatisfying to them. The gains are economic security and acceptance by society.

Lesbian mothers as a group also tend to be ignored. Our society does not generally take kindly to, or even contemplate the idea of anyone's mother being a lesbian. Once again there is the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and once again the lesbian is aware that she is not really a part of society.

Adoption of children is another area in which homosexuals find themselves discriminated against. Many homosexual couples desire children in the same way as heterosexual couples. Adoption, which is the obvious way of doing this is refused by the various authorities - usually on the mistaken and moralistic belief that homosexuals are sick perverts and therefore not capable of looking after children.

Throughout this statement the problem of social stigma has been proposed as the

foundation for most of the lesbian's difficulties. I cannot stress too much the devastating effect such branding has. As already mentioned, it forces the lesbian to take on a dual identity and to hide her true self. In addition it creates extreme conflicts with family and friends who carry society's negative image of the lesbian. Reaction from relatives and friends is almost always intense and often involves rejection, ridicule, and disparagement of lesbian partners.

The following quote sums up most adequately the problems facing any woman who has lesbian tendencies. All of them can be viewed as a product of society's attitudes towards homosexuality.

"I am a lesbian."

A simple statement, it would seem, which merely conveys that the woman expressing it has a preference for women both erotically and emotionally. But behind that statement may be years, sometimes decades, of soul searching, untold agonies of self-doubt and guilt, and painful conflict - conflict between recognition of her inner being and acceptance of an assigned societal role, conflict between the desperate need for family support and despair at the prospect of bringing shame on her loved ones, conflict between her religious belief in God's eternal love for all His children and the negative pronouncements of church doctrine, conflict between honesty and deceit, between abject silence and open admission, between maintaining a dual life and loss of a career, between being crippled or whole, between life or death.

Behind that simple statement - "I am a lesbian" - are implications so vast that the individual who would survive with any measure of sanity must examine all that she has ever been taught, all that she has ever experienced, all that she has ever hoped or dreamed. Some never make it through this long and lonely journey. They can't face rejection, the concept of being "queer" or different. They believe the myths. They succumb to fear and assume the guilt. They cannot play it straight, nor can they adjust to their homosexuality."

From Lesbian/Women by
Martin, D and Lyon, P. Bantam Books
1972.

Very briefly, C.A.M.P. sees the following courses of action as vital if this situation is to ever change:-

1. Sex education courses should teach that homosexuality is a valid alternative life style.
2. An overall educational programme is needed to rid society of the many myths it holds about homosexuality, and to promote acceptance.
3. Governments need to legislate to remove discrimination in the areas mentioned in this statement. Many of these could most simply be resolved by providing a means by which homosexual couples can obtain a legal marriage, or enter into some form of legal contract together.

"Viv"