

**LOVE YOUR ENEMY? The Debate
Between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism
(1981, Onlywomen Press Booklet Title)**

**POLITICAL LESBIANISM: THE CASE AGAINST HETEROSEXUALITY
(1979, Original Conference Paper Title)**

We know that the question of whether all feminists should be lesbians is not new. We have had to work out our ideas on the subject because often when we talk about our politics and what it means to say men are the enemy, with other women, we are asked whether we are saying that all feminists should be lesbians.

We realise that the topic is explosive. It is something we are supposed to talk about at home and in close and trusted groups of friends and not make political statements about in the movement, lest our heterosexual sisters accuse us of woman-hating. Is it true that we must conceal our strong political beliefs on the subject when talking with other feminists? We would like to raise the whole issue for discussion in a workshop; not just whether all feminists should be lesbians, but precisely why we think they should be and whether and how we may begin to talk about it more openly.

We do think that all feminists can and should be political lesbians. Our definition of a political lesbian is a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men. It does not mean compulsory sexual activity with women. The paper is divided into two parts. The first covers the reasons why we think serious feminists have no choice but to abandon heterosexuality. The second is arranged in the form of questions raised and comments made to us about the subject of political lesbianism and the way we think they should be answered.

(1) What heterosexuality is about and why it must be abandoned

• Sexuality

What part does sexuality play in the oppression of women? Only in the system of oppression that is male supremacy does the oppressor actually invade and colonise the interior of the body of the oppressed. Attached to all forms of sexual behaviour are meanings of dominance and submission, power and powerlessness, conquest and humiliation. There is very special importance attached to sexuality under male supremacy when every sexual reference, every sexual joke, every sexual image serves to remind a woman of her invaded centre and a man of his power. Why all this fuss in our culture about sex? Because it is specifically through sexuality that the fundamental oppression, that of men over women, is maintained. (This should be a book, can't really be gone into now.)

• The Heterosexual Couple

The heterosexual couple is the basic unit of the political structure of male supremacy. In it each individual woman comes under the control of an individual man. It is more efficient by far than keeping women in ghettos, camps or even sheds at the bottom of the garden. In the couple, love and sex are used to obscure the realities of oppression, to prevent women identifying with each other in order to revolt, and from identifying 'their' man as part of the enemy. Any woman who takes part in a heterosexual couple helps to shore up male supremacy by making its foundations stronger.

• Penetration

Penetration (wherever we refer to penetration, we mean penetration by the penis) is not necessary to the sexual pleasure of women or even of men. Its performance leads to reproduction or tedious/dangerous forms of contraception. Why then does it lie at the heart of the sexualised culture of this particular stage of male supremacy? Why are more and more women, at younger and younger age, encouraged by psychiatrists, doctors, marriage guidance counsellors, the porn industry, the growth movement, lefties

and Masters and Johnson to get fucked more and more often? Because the form of oppression of women under male supremacy is changing. As more women are able to earn a little more money and the pressures of reproduction are relieved so the hold of individual men and men as a class over women is being strengthened through sexual control.

• **The function of penetration**

Penetration is an act of great symbolic significance by which the oppressor enters the body of the oppressed. But it is more than a symbol, its function and effect is the punishment and control of women. It is not just rape which serves this function but every act of penetration, even that which is euphemistically described as ‘making love.’ We have all heard men say about an uppity women, ‘What she needs is a good fuck.’ This is no idle remark. Every man knows that a fucked woman is a woman under the control of men, whose body is open to men, a women who is tamed and broken in. Before the sexual revolution there was no mistake about penetration being for the benefit of men. The sexual revolution is a con trick. It serves to disguise the oppressive nature of male sexuality and we are told that penetration is for our benefit as well.

Every act of penetration for a woman is an invasion which undermines her confidence and saps her strength. For a man it is an act of power and mastery which makes him stronger, not just over one woman but over all women. So every woman who engages in penetration bolsters the oppressor and reinforces the class power of men.

(2) Questions and comments

(a) But it sounds like you are saying that heterosexual women are the enemy!

No, men are the enemy. Heterosexual women are collaborators with the enemy. All the good work that our heterosexual feminist sisters do for women is undermined by the counter-revolutionary activity they engage in with men. Being a heterosexual feminist is like being in the resistance in Nazi-occupied Europe where in the daytime you blow up a bridge, in the evening you rush to repair it. Take Women’s Aid for example: women who live with men cannot tell battered women that survival without men is possible since they are not doing it themselves. Every woman who lives with or fucks a man helps to maintain the oppression of her sisters and hinders our struggle.

(b) But we don’t do penetration, my boyfriend and me

If you engage in any form of sexuality with a man you are reinforcing his class power. You may escape the most extreme form of ritual humiliation but because of the emotional accretions to any form of heterosexual behaviour, men gain great advantages and women lose. There is no such thing as ‘pure’ sexual pleasure. Such ‘pleasure’ is created by fantasy, memory and experience. Sexual ‘pleasure’ cannot be separated from the emotions that accompany the exercise of power and the experience of powerlessness.

(If you don’t do penetration, why not take a woman lover? If you strip a man of his unique ability to humiliate, you are left with a creature who is merely worse at every sort of sensual activity than a woman is.)

(c) But my boyfriend does not penetrate me, I enclose him

A rose is a rose by any other name and so is penetration. Or possibly, ‘You can’t make a silk purse out of a boar’s ear’ is a more apt expression. The kindest interpretation is to say that believing in enclosure is wishful thinking. It would be more realistic to say that it is a cop-out and a rationalisation for continuing the activity. Enclosure, where an active vagina (helped by strengthening exercises) sucks in a penis could only take place where a woman and a man were born fully formed, totally innocent, onto an uninhabited desert island (where they might well discover fucking anyway). No act of penetration takes place in isolation. Each takes place in a system of relationships that is male supremacy. As no

individual woman can be 'liberated' under male supremacy, so no act of penetration can escape its function and its symbolic power.

(d) But I Like fucking

Giving up fucking for a feminist is about taking your politics seriously. Women who are socialists are prepared to give up many things which they might enjoy because they see how these things tie into and support the whole system of economic class oppression which they are fighting. They will resist buying Cape apples because the profits go to South Africa. Obviously it is more difficult for some feminists to give up penetration which is so fundamental to the system of oppression which we are fighting.

(e) It is much easier for you in the lesbian ghetto than for me. I have to live out the contradictions of my politics which is a hard, relentless, day-by-day struggle with the man I live with

That's simply not true, living without heterosexual privilege is difficult and dangerous. Try going into a pub with groups of women or living in a women's house where youths in the street lay siege with stones and catcalls.

Heterosexual privileges are male approval, more safety from physical attack, greater ease in dealing with the authorities, getting repairs done, safety from a besieging obscene phone-caller, being able to refer to a man in the bus queue or at work which brings smiles of approval to a member of the male ruling class who has greater earning power.

Because we choose to live without these privileges we resent being used by heterosexual feminists as fuelling stations when they are worn down by their struggles with their men. Women's liberation groups and women's households should be a refuge and support for heterosexual sisters in resolving their contradictions by getting out but should not be used to prop up heterosexual relationships and thereby shore up the structure of male supremacy.

(f) But lesbian relationships are also fucked up by power struggles

That is sometimes true, but the power of one woman is never backed up by a superior sex-class position. Struggles between women do not directly strengthen the oppression of all women or build up the strength of men. Personal perfection in relationships is not a realistic goal under male supremacy. Lesbianism is a necessary political choice, part of the tactics of our struggle, not a passport to paradise.

(g) I won't give up what I've got unless what you offer me is better

We never promised you a rose garden. We do not say that all feminists should be lesbians because it is wonderful. The lesbian dream of woman-loving, bare-breasted, guitar-playing softballers, gambolling on sun-soaked hillsides is more suited to California, supposing it bears any resemblance to reality, than to Hackney.

But yes, it is better to be a lesbian. The advantages include the pleasure of knowing that you are not directly servicing men, living without the strain of a glaring contradiction in your personal life, uniting the personal and the political, loving and putting your energies into those you are fighting alongside rather than those you are fighting against, and the possibility of greater trust, honesty and directness in your communication with women.

Communication with heterosexual women is fraught with difficulties, with static which comes from their relationships with men. Men distort such communication. A heterosexual woman will have a different perception and reaction to things you say; she may be defensive and is likely to be thinking 'what about Nigel?' When you talk of women's interests and the future and survival of women, her imagination may be blocked by concern for her man and his brothers. You feel under pressure to say nice things which will not threaten her.

(h) You are guilt-tripping us

No. Guilt-tripping is used to prevent women from telling the truth as they see it and from talking about hard political realities. It is you, heterosexual sisters, who are guilt-tripping us. It is possible to stop collaborating and asking you to do that is not a guilt-trip.

(i) Are all lesbian feminists political lesbians?

No. Some women who are lesbians and feminists work closely with men on the male left (either in their groups or in women's caucuses within them), or provide mouthpieces within the women's liberation movement for men's ideas even when non-aligned. It may well be that these women find it more difficult to see that men are the enemy because they are treated as substitute but inferior men by left males and are able to feel superior to the straight women who are still struggling against sexual oppression in their beds. They are not woman-identified and gain privileges through associating with men and putting forward ideas which are only mildly unacceptable to male left ideology.

(j) But you don't understand how difficult it is to give up men

Most of us know from personal experience how practically difficult and painful it is to decide not to fuck again and get out from the man we live with and/or love. It is usually only done with the love, support and strength of other women who have made that break and whose criticism and straight-talking spurred us on. We know that for some women, e.g. those with children, those with no easy access to the movement, and those without the experience of living on their own, the break is more difficult than for others and they need more time and *practical* support. We know how difficult it is to find a women's house to move into what it is like to feel like a 'new girl' at the women's disco. But part of the support must be in explaining as clearly as possible the political reasons for our own choice and talking honestly about all the difficulties with the women who are making it.

Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group
(WIRES 81)

Paper first given to a conference in September 1979

AFTERWORDS FROM LEEDS REVOLUTIONARY FEMINISTS

For some time before this paper was written those of us who had been invited to Women's Liberation groups to talk about our politics felt very dishonest and uneasy when women asked whether we thought all feminists should give up sexual relationships with men. We thought yes, but did not say so because we feared women would be alienated from all the rest of what we had to say. The paper was written partly to resolve our unease and dishonesty.

"Political lesbianism" was written very quickly in a high energy brain-storming session one evening, for discussion at a Revolutionary and Radical Feminist Conference. It reflected some discussions our group had had, but in a very condensed form. This was because we knew that we would be able to expand and unpack these ideas in workshops at the conference. It went down quite well at the time and there were four workshops on the subject.

We were asked to put the paper in WIRES because it had sparked off discussion, and women at the conference wanted other women to join in with the original paper available to them. If it had sunk like a stone it wouldn't have received any wider distribution.

Because it appeared in WIRES, it was seen as a finished product, which was never intended. We were moving towards an analysis of how heterosexuality is central to women's oppression. The debate that followed made us look back at the paper again and again, and our own discussions benefitted from the feedback. We found some of our comments flip, offensive and inconsistent, such as "why not take a woman lover?" We now think that "collaborators" is the wrong word to describe women who sleep

with men, since this implies a conscious act of betrayal. Even if applied solely to heterosexual feminists, rather than to heterosexual women in general, it is inaccurate: most feminists do not see men as the enemy, or heterosexuality as crucial to male supremacy. Again, our list of heterosexual privileges is incorrect, and does not answer the question we raised. We realise that this is a very important and complex issue and needs further discussion.

Some lesbians and some heterosexual feminists saw the paper as an attack on heterosexual women: in fact, we were criticising heterosexuality as the accepted form of sexuality under male supremacy, and saying that it is used to oppress us. This is not clear when we make statements like “Attached to all forms of sexual behaviour are meanings of dominance/submission...” By sexuality we mean *male* sexuality, as it is *male* sexuality that determines the form that heterosexuality takes. Penny Clouette points out that we don’t explain *how* heterosexuality shores up male supremacy – this omission also came out in discussion at the conference. The discussion which followed has forced us to return to this and clarify it for ourselves.

The paper does not explain how we presumably arrived at these ideas. Personal experience is important, as it is through this that we became feminists, but we couldn’t go into our individual backgrounds as there were several women in the group, so the paper would have ended up being far too long; besides, we wanted to point conference discussion towards political strategies, and thought that our personal experiences could be talked about in the workshop if relevant. We tried to be accountable by listing our names at the front of the conference papers.

Some women have seen the paper as suggesting that withdrawal of sexual services from men is the sum total of our political strategy. We completely disagree with the idea that living as separately as possible from men is by itself sufficient to overthrow patriarchy, and we said so in a paper we wrote on Separatism for the same conference. It would have been clearer if we had put this paper in WIRES alongside “Political Lesbianism.”

THE TITLE

Some women have been puzzled about why a paper called “Political Lesbianism” concentrates on heterosexuality. In retrospect, the subtitle we added in the WIRES version, “The Case Against Heterosexuality,” is more accurate; but we also recognize that many women were glad to have the term “political lesbian” brought to their attention. We certainly didn’t invent it, but not every woman has read “Redstockings” and other American feminist writing from the early ‘70s when it was first used. Also, some women were confused as the term has been used since then to mean lots of different things, such as lesbians with a social awareness, non-lesbians accepting the lesbian label as a gesture of solidarity with lesbians, lesbians who were members of the Gay Liberation Front, etc., etc.

THE DEFINITION

We defined a Political Lesbian as a woman-identified-woman who did not fuck men. We now think it’s rubbish to say that women fuck men; what happens is that men fuck women, or women get fucked by men.

Woman-identified-woman has been used so much that it is hard to think about what it really means. When we re-examined the phrase, we realised that we took it to mean: women who, by withdrawing their energy and support from men, have put women first. In doing so, they have found it is incompatible with sleeping with men. This had been the experience of some of us in the group. One woman in the group had not given up men for consciously feminist reasons. We realise that many lesbians have never slept with men at all. We are trying to describe the process by which some feminists become lesbians, and to say that it was possible for women to stop sleeping with men for political reasons without necessarily sleeping with women. The value of calling yourself a political

lesbian is to state that you are not sexually available to men; to repeat what we said in the paper, it is not about compulsory sexual activity with women.

THE QUESTIONS

A lot of women presumed we made them up. In fact, they were questions we'd either asked ourselves, had been asked by friends, or had come up at conferences or meetings.

THE AFTERMATH

The furore that resulted after the paper was published in WIRES led some of us to believe there was no room in the Women's Liberation Movement for real honesty about something as controversial as sexual politics. We don't think that now, as a fully-fledged discussion around sexuality is taking place, as this pamphlet shows.

Sometimes we found it difficult to recognize ourselves in some of the caricatures that emerged from the debate as cadres, an elite, authoritarian. The paper was written by a small group of women who really were in no position to impose anything, except a paper for discussion, upon the Movement. We really thought, when writing the paper, that we were merely expressing commonly held views which were just not usually written down. To some extent we were scapegoated for writing them down.

We were distressed to be accused of being anti-heterosexual-women, when one of the major aims of the paper was to start an honest dialogue about what sexual orientation had to do with our politics. We see heterosexuality as an institution of male domination, not a free expression of personal preference. Heterosexuality is forced upon us from babyhood, it is extremely difficult to break away from; but this is often dismissed. Believing the personal is political means we cannot separate sexuality off from male supremacy as a politics-free zone.

Lal Coveney, Tina Crockett, Al Garthwaite, Sheila Jeffreys, Valerie Sinclair
March 1981

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The footnotes are derived from the discussion of the Onlywomen Press booklet by Sheila Jeffreys and Anna Prats of Women's Declaration International (WDI) on 29 January 2023 for the Radical Feminist Perspectives series of 1 hour discussions of various radical feminist books and theoretical ideas. Notes were mainly taken on the discussion of the actual paper and its afterword, not the response letter snippets. To really get the most from Jeffreys and Prats' discussion, of course it is far better to watch the whole video on the WDI youtube channel. Numbers in square brackets follow the order the quotes were discussed in. Auto-footnoting insists on following the linear order.

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We realise that the topic is explosive. It is something we are supposed to talk about at home and in close and trusted groups of friends and not make political statements about in the movement, lest our heterosexual sisters accuse us of woman-hating.[2]¹ Is it true that we must conceal our strong political beliefs on the subject when talking with other feminists? We would like to raise the whole issue for discussion in a workshop; not just whether all feminists should be lesbians, but precisely why we think they should be and whether and how we may begin to talk about it more openly.

We do think that all feminists can and should be political lesbians.[1]² Our definition of a political lesbian is a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men. It does not mean compulsory sexual activity with women. The paper is divided into two parts. The first covers the reasons why we think serious feminists have no choice but to abandon heterosexuality. The second is arranged in the form of questions raised and comments made to us about the subject of political lesbianism and the way we think they should be answered.

(1) What heterosexuality is about and why it must be abandoned

• Sexuality

What part does sexuality play in the oppression of women? Only in the system of oppression that is male supremacy does the oppressor actually invade and colonise the interior of the body of the oppressed. Attached to all forms of sexual behaviour are meanings of dominance and submission,

- 1 - one of the reasons the original paper was written was accusations of lesbianism were used to discredit feminists
- so they decided to tell what they really thought, and to break the training not to talk about it
- 2 - negative reaction to the idea that feminists can become lesbians as suggested in this quote
- at the time, social construction of both sexuality and sex role stereotypes was considered a fact, therefore it was understood that women can and should change
- later realized the term "fuck" did not make sense to describe what women do and would not use it now
- definition of lesbians as women who don't "fuck men" controversial because it suggested a woman could be a lesbian without having genital sex with women
- society is generally organized by whom people have genital connection to, not having a genital connection is not recognized, puts a person outside of society, being a spinster for instance was considered a "problem"
- at the time, understood that women who had no genital connection with men or women had nowhere to go, argued for calling them political lesbians
- celibate women often pressured to call themselves heterosexual even if they are not or firmly "none of the above" in genital connection terms
- sexuality is a fundamental axis of oppression for women

power and powerlessness, conquest and humiliation. There is very special importance attached to sexuality under male supremacy when every sexual reference, every sexual joke, every sexual image serves to remind a woman of her invaded centre and a man of his power.[4]³ Why all this fuss in our culture about sex? Because it is specifically through sexuality that the fundamental oppression, that of men over women, is maintained.[3]⁴ (This should be a book, can't really be gone into now.)

• **The Heterosexual Couple**

The heterosexual couple is the basic unit of the political structure of male supremacy. In it each individual woman comes under the control of an individual man. It is more efficient by far than keeping women in ghettos, camps or even sheds at the bottom of the garden.[5]⁵ In the couple, love and sex are used to obscure the realities of oppression, to prevent women identifying with each other in order to revolt, and from identifying 'their' man as part of the enemy. Any woman who takes part in a heterosexual couple helps to shore up male supremacy by making its foundations stronger.

• **Penetration**

Penetration (wherever we refer to penetration, we mean penetration by the penis) is not necessary to the sexual pleasure of women or even of men. Its performance leads to reproduction or tedious/dangerous forms of contraception. Why then does it lie at the heart of the sexualised culture of this particular stage of male supremacy? Why are more and more women, at younger and younger age, encouraged by psychiatrists, doctors, marriage guidance counsellors, the porn industry, the growth movement, lefties and Masters and Johnson to get fucked more and more often? Because the form of oppression of women under male supremacy is changing. As more women are able to earn a little more money and the pressures of reproduction are relieved so the hold of individual men and men as a class over women is being strengthened through sexual control.

- 3 - in 1979-80, lots of discussion of SM and the origins of masochism in women, claims that women could do these things when it was all structured by defining whatever women experienced in sex as degradation
 - there was a U.S. group of women, heterosexual and lesbian, who insisted they would not engage in sex precisely because it was impregnated with women hating and male supremacy, "women against sex"
 - now it is worse with men literally strangling women to death during sex; the point is that sex is structured to express male dominance and female subordination for both men and women
- 4 - in 1979 there was more and more criticism is heterosexuality, including a structural analysis
 - heterosexuality and sexuality were seen as structural and political, using male sexuality and violence to political, social, and structural ends
 - this was a response to socialist and liberal feminists, especially the latter who claimed women just needed to be sexually liberated and do more sex in more "interesting ways" with men
 - socialist feminists focussed on equal pay, equal access and the like; revolutionary feminists focussed on sexuality, the fundamental structuring force under male supremacy
 - radical versus revolutionary feminism: in 1977 SJ wrote a paper called "The Need for Revolutionary Feminism" positing women were controlled via sexuality, and many radical feminists called themselves revolutionary feminists after that
 - revolutionary feminists were mostly lesbians, worked against violence against women including countering porn, founding rape crisis centres
- 5 - clearly expresses the fundamental role of heterosexuality in male domination; heterosexuality is a structure of male domination by which women are isolated and forced to serve men
 - heterosexual couple is the fundamental control unit of male domination and of the economy in capitalism
 - heterosexuality is enforced upon women; there was a huge critique of the heterosexual family in the early 1980s and the demand for individual appliances and other consumerist moves
 - to have a revolution to change the world, this needed to be disinterred, examined, and challenged; so also the myth of love and romance used to cover this over

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6 - women try to make the revolution in the daytime then go home and feed men's egos and otherwise serve them
- we were clear that women had to be first and put our best energies into women, not men, into women who are the solution; we couldn't understand why women would choose men with whom they had nothing in common

individual woman can be 'liberated' under male supremacy, so no act of penetration can escape its function and its symbolic power.[7]⁷

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- 7
- became very aware of this via studying the works of the sexologists who insisted women had to orgasm with penetration to be "conquered" and rendered "obedient"
 - there are obviously lots of other practices that don't involve penile penetration that appeal to women
 - problem is that penile penetration is a reproductive act; to avoid reproduction women's bodies have to be technologized to prevent conception, i.e. the pill, barriers
 - the practice is unsuitable for pleasure therefore, and not necessarily pleasurable apart from that
 - its symbolism is arranged to show subordination of women by invading their bodies; also spread STDs
 - at the time women were giving up penile penetration for these reasons, whether they stayed heterosexual or not
 - penetration is fundamental to male supremacy

Communication with heterosexual women is fraught with difficulties, with static which comes from their relationships with men. Men distort such communication. A heterosexual woman will have a different perception and reaction to things you say; she may be defensive and is likely to be thinking 'what about Nigel?' When you talk of women's interests and the future and survival of women, her imagination may be blocked by concern for her man and his brothers. You feel under pressure to say nice things which will not threaten her.

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No. Guilt-tripping is used to prevent women from telling the truth as they see it and from talking about hard political realities. It is you, heterosexual sisters, who are guilt-tripping us. It is possible to stop collaborating and asking you to do that is not a guilt-trip.

(i) Are all lesbian feminists political lesbians?

No. Some women who are lesbians and feminists work closely with men on the male left (either in their groups or in women's caucuses within them), or provide mouthpieces within the women's liberation movement for men's ideas even when non-aligned. It may well be that these women find it more difficult to see that men are the enemy because they are treated as substitute but inferior men by left males and are able to feel superior to the straight women who are still struggling against sexual oppression in their beds. They are not woman-identified and gain privileges through associating with men and putting forward ideas which are only mildly unacceptable to male left ideology.

(j) But you don't understand how difficult it is to give up men

Most of us know from personal experience how practically difficult and painful it is to decide not to fuck again and get out from the man we live with and/or love. It is usually only done with the love, support and strength of other women who have made that break and whose criticism and straight-talking spurred us on. We know that for some women, e.g. those with children, those with no easy access to the movement, and those without the experience of living on their own, the break is more difficult than for others and they need more time and *practical* support. We know how difficult it is to find a women's house to move into what it is like to feel like a 'new girl' at the women's disco. But part of the support must be in explaining as clearly as possible the political reasons for our own choice and talking honestly about all the difficulties with the women who are making it.

Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group
(WIRES 81)

Paper first given to a conference in September 1979⁸

8 General Commentary:

- now this paper is very interesting to young women, and at the time it was revolutionary and had a very mixed response
- that a woman does something does not make it feminist; it is not woman-hating to analyse the ways in which women are oppressed
- the paper was originally written for a 1979 conference and meant to inspire discussion in a workshop to develop theory and create a revolution; the conference paper was blunt and not mealy mouthed
- women responded that "the heterosexual women feel guilty" and that the ideas shouldn't be shared because then the heterosexual women wouldn't go to women-owned businesses or take part in women's groups
- big backlash and demand to only discuss the ideas in closed rooms, and they still got out, indicating they are very fundamental and important
- women complained who came out before the feminist movement and are genitally connected to women, resented critique of heterosexuality as supposedly an insult to them
- at the time revolutionary feminists were striving to create a lesbian universe so that women could get away from heterosexuality, and to create something far more than a mere genital connection
- if it is just about "genital connection," where do the lesbian spinsters go, the women who love women and want to be with women, where to they go? We need to expand the definition of lesbianism *for ourselves* (cont. next page)

AFTERWORDS FROM LEEDS REVOLUTIONARY FEMINISTS

For some time before this paper was written those of us who had been invited to Women's Liberation groups to talk about our politics felt very dishonest and uneasy when women asked whether we thought all feminists should give up sexual relationships with men. We thought yes, but did not say so because we feared women would be alienated from all the rest of what we had to say. The paper was written partly to resolve our unease and dishonesty.

"Political lesbianism" was written very quickly in a high energy brain-storming session one evening, for discussion at a Revolutionary and Radical Feminist Conference. It reflected some discussions our group had had, but in a very condensed form. This was because we knew that we would be able to expand and unpack these ideas in workshops at the conference. It went down quite well at the time and there were four workshops on the subject.

We were asked to put the paper in WIRES because it had sparked off discussion, and women at the conference wanted other women to join in with the original paper available to them. If it had sunk like a stone it wouldn't have received any wider distribution.

Because it appeared in WIRES, it was seen as a finished product, which was never intended. We were moving towards an analysis of how heterosexuality is central to women's oppression. The debate that followed made us look back at the paper again and again, and our own discussions benefitted from the feedback. We found some of our comments flip, offensive and inconsistent, such as "why not take a woman lover?" We now think that "collaborators" is the wrong word to describe women who sleep with men, since this implies a conscious act of betrayal. Even if applied solely to heterosexual feminists, rather than to heterosexual women in general, it is inaccurate: most feminists do not see men as the enemy, or heterosexuality as crucial to male supremacy. Again, our list of heterosexual privileges is incorrect, and does not answer the question we raised. We realise that this is a very important and complex issue and needs further discussion.

Some lesbians and some heterosexual feminists saw the paper as an attack on heterosexual women: in fact, we were criticising heterosexuality as the accepted form of sexuality under male supremacy, and saying that it is used to oppress us. This is not clear when we make statements like "Attached to all forms of sexual behaviour are meanings of dominance/submission..." By sexuality we mean *male* sexuality, as it is *male* sexuality that determines the form that heterosexuality takes. Penny Clouette points out that we don't explain *how* heterosexuality shores up male supremacy – this omission also came out in discussion at the conference. The discussion which followed has forced us to return to this and clarify it for ourselves.

The paper does not explain how we presumably arrived at these ideas. Personal experience is important, as it is through this that we became feminists, but we couldn't go into our individual backgrounds as there were several women in the group, so the paper would have ended up being far too long; besides, we wanted to point conference discussion towards political strategies, and thought that our personal experiences could be talked about in the workshop if relevant. We tried to be accountable by listing our names at the front of the conference papers.

Some women have seen the paper as suggesting that withdrawal of sexual services from men is the sum total of our political strategy. We completely disagree with the idea that living as separately as possible from men is by itself sufficient to overthrow patriarchy, and we said so in a paper we wrote on

- attempts were made to keep lesbianism and feminism separate
- Paula Jennings observed "So far I've come across no analysis of heterosexuality by a heterosexual feminist."
- good criticism, heterosexual feminists weren't discussing this at that time, Celia Kitzinger's edited volume *Heterosexuality: A Reader* asked about this
- lots of bits have been looked at, but not the institution and how it is constructed and operates
- we got lots of complaints about how we were saying things, we were definitely tone policed, it was not "nice enough" to women, "too simple," or "too academic"
- where are all the books on how women deal with heterosexuality? Of course a three page conference paper can't cover the whole complexity of women's lives in all their diversity

Separatism for the same conference. It would have been clearer if we had put this paper in WIRES alongside “Political Lesbianism.”

THE TITLE

Some women have been puzzled about why a paper called “Political Lesbianism” concentrates on heterosexuality. In retrospect, the subtitle we added in the WIRES version, “The Case Against Heterosexuality,” is more accurate; but we also recognize that many women were glad to have the term “political lesbian” brought to their attention. We certainly didn’t invent it, but not every woman has read “Redstockings” and other American feminist writing from the early ‘70s when it was first used. Also, some women were confused as the term has been used since then to mean lots of different things, such as lesbians with a social awareness, non-lesbians accepting the lesbian label as a gesture of solidarity with lesbians, lesbians who were members of the Gay Liberation Front, etc., etc.

THE DEFINITION

We defined a Political Lesbian as a woman-identified-woman who did not fuck men. We now think it’s rubbish to say that women fuck men; what happens is that men fuck women, or women get fucked by men.

Woman-identified-woman has been used so much that it is hard to think about what it really means. When we re-examined the phrase, we realised that we took it to mean: women who, by withdrawing their energy and support from men, have put women first. In doing so, they have found it is incompatible with sleeping with men. This had been the experience of some of us in the group. One woman in the group had not given up men for consciously feminist reasons. We realise that many lesbians have never slept with men at all. We are trying to describe the process by which some feminists become lesbians, and to say that it was possible for women to stop sleeping with men for political reasons without necessarily sleeping with women. The value of calling yourself a political lesbian is to state that you are not sexually available to men; to repeat what we said in the paper, it is not about compulsory sexual activity with women.

THE QUESTIONS

A lot of women presumed we made them up. In fact, they were questions we’d either asked ourselves, had been asked by friends, or had come up at conferences or meetings.

THE AFTERMATH

The furore that resulted after the paper was published in WIRES led some of us to believe there was no room in the Women’s Liberation Movement for real honesty about something as controversial as sexual politics. We don’t think that now, as a fully-fledged discussion around sexuality is taking place, as this pamphlet shows.

Sometimes we found it difficult to recognize ourselves in some of the caricatures that emerged from the debate as cadres, an elite, authoritarian. The paper was written by a small group of women who really were in no position to impose anything, except a paper for discussion, upon the Movement. We really thought, when writing the paper, that we were merely expressing commonly held views which were just not usually written down. To some extent we were scapegoated for writing them down.

We were distressed to be accused of being anti-heterosexual-women, when one of the major aims of the paper was to start an honest dialogue about what sexual orientation had to do with our politics. We see heterosexuality as an institution of male domination, not a free expression of personal preference. Heterosexuality is forced upon us from babyhood, it is extremely difficult to break away from; but this is often dismissed. Believing the personal is political means we cannot separate sexuality off from male supremacy as a politics-free zone.

Lal Coveney, Tina Crockett, Al Garthwaite, Sheila Jeffreys, Valerie Sinclair
March 1981