

## **Lesbian Feminism Now and Then**

### **Seville Conference 28 November 2021**

Hello Sisters, It is a delight to be able to speak with you today. I am going to talk about where lesbian feminism came from and what it was about at the time of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s and 1980s. I will describe the main ideas. I explained in my book *The Lesbian Revolution* in 2018 that lesbian feminism was the very heart of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s and 1980s, playing a vital and dominant role in creating culture and community and challenging pornography and violence against women. Today it is hard even to use the word lesbian, women are under so much pressure to call themselves something else, bi or queer or non-binary or trans because these words are more polite and do not upset men. All that we achieved for lesbians and women has been pretty much wiped out in the antifeminist backlash of the 1990s and 2000s. I will talk about the challenges that the lesbians across generations are facing as we bring back lesbian feminism today.

### **The origins of lesbian feminism**

Lesbian feminism had two sources, the Gay Liberation Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement, both of which were created in the US in the late 60s and came to the UK a couple of years later. The Women's Liberation Movement was women only. All the meetings, marches, conferences, social and cultural events were women only. The lesbians who left the Gay Liberation Movement did so because they were feminists and realised that they could not continue to work with men who had very different and contradictory interests. Gay men are members of the ruling class of men and lesbians are members of the subordinate class of women. I explained the fundamental difference in political interests and behaviours in my book *Unpacking Queer Politics* in 2003.

The lesbians who came from the Women's Liberation Movement to create lesbian feminism did so because they realised that lesbians had separate interests that could not be served in a mainly heterosexual Women's Liberation Movement. Lesbian feminists all continued to work within the Women's Liberation Movement but we also created our own separate, lesbian specific, theory and politics, our own activism, our own spaces and culture.

What we had was a lesbian politics which enabled women to come out as lesbians with confidence and with pride. We saw ourselves as a revolutionary force. We had lesbian and women only spaces for lesbians to meet and socialise, dance, make music and art. We had lesbian tradeswomen, bands, novels and poetry, books of theory, we had a philosophy. There were lesbian

centres and lesbian groups all over the country. None of this included men who said they were lesbians. These men were barely in evidence at the time. They did not yet have a movement, they had not yet effected state capture, capture of policy and of institutions. They were just a few cross-dressers. Lesbians were not transgressing at all before the 1990s.

### **Lesbian politics**

Today lesbian feminist ideas have been forgotten or are furiously condemned. One of the ideas that is condemned today is our understanding that lesbianism, like heterosexuality, is socially constructed rather than biological. Many thousands of women like me chose proudly to be lesbians. Our passionate love for women has been our politics and it has been our whole lives. Today lesbians like me are under attack, traduced and insulted. Lesbians who had any kind of sexual contact with men before becoming lesbians are told we have no right to call ourselves lesbians, we are straightbians or should admit that we are bisexual. That pretty much wipes out the lesbian history that we worked so hard to uncover because almost all the famous lesbians in history had something to do with men at one time. It wipes out most of what we know as lesbian feminist history and culture since the great lesbian feminist theorists mostly related to men at one time.

Lesbianism, the lesbians who say they ‘always have been’ assert, is biological and any women not lesbians from birth are just pretending. These are very conservative times, in which the groundbreaking ideas of lesbian feminism are treated by many lesbians with a fury which makes the idea that heterosexual women could proudly and joyfully choose to love other women seem impossible. But at one time many, many thousands of women did make such a choice. In the older generation of lesbians now involved in the new Women’s Liberation Movement there are a great many of us. We are still there, still immensely proud of our choices.

### **Heterosexuality as an institution**

One fundamental understanding of lesbian feminism was that lesbians are a resistance movement to the basic structure of male domination which is the institution of heterosexuality. Lesbian feminists politicise heterosexuality. We argue that heterosexuality is an institution, rather than a sexual preference. Saying that it is an institution means that it goes far beyond just an attraction to persons of the opposite sex. It is socially and politically constructed to provide a means of extracting women’s unpaid labour and controlling women and their children under the power of individual men. Male domination is founded upon the possession and use of women’s bodies in relationships which in most parts of the world and most of history were forced upon girls and women.

Heterosexuality is necessary to male domination because it is the foundation of men's power and women are indentured into it as children in child marriage which is more reasonably called child sexual slavery, through child sexual abuse, through the sale or exchange of girls and young women in forced or arranged marriage and polygamy. Only in certain cultures in the West can women be said to 'choose' to enter the institution. But whether through obvious force or what is called choice, in heterosexuality the dominant males acquire children. They force women to reproduce, or control their childbearing, and this provides them with a labour force or heirs. The forms of unpaid labour that men acquire in heterosexuality are sexual servicing in which women are used routinely in sex that they do not want but cannot say no to, domestic labour, emotional labour, the production and rearing of children. All of this is unpaid. This unpaid labour is the basis of the global economy which could not survive without it. It enables men to work full time, to avoid childcare, to get fed, to attend late night sessions of parliament. It is an affirmative action programme for men which is essential to their rule. It is a slave system, women earn nothing from it except the destruction of their own opportunities. This is such a necessary foundation for the whole economic and political system of male domination that it cannot be left to chance or 'choice'. For all these reasons, heterosexuality is, as the lesbian feminist theorist Adrienne Rich said, 'compulsory'.

### **Forces that create heterosexuality**

Heterosexuality cannot be said to be freely chosen because of the powerful forces that propel women into it. These include the heterosexualisation of the entire culture, pressure from within families, the insistent pressure of boys and men from childhood which requires girls and women to be sexually available, rape and other forms of sexual violence. They include the erasure of lesbian existence, including the erasure of lesbians from culture taking place now through the transgendering of lesbians, and the exclusion of use of the word 'lesbian'. One of the pressures comes from those within the lesbian community who seek to disown and exclude women like me and other feminists who dare to say it is possible to choose. Forces include the absence of any lesbian infrastructure to support girls and women becoming lesbians within their schools or wider society. There is little or no lesbian literature, theatre, films, tv series. There are no longer, as once there were, lesbian centres, bars and clubs, young lesbian groups in schools and youth clubs. There are no lesbian groups that do not have transvestites in them trying to get sexual access to lesbians. There is no infrastructure at all. We made our own in the 70s and 80s and it was grand, but it has all been dismantled and demolished. There is no lesbian

universe that is so attractive today that women are desperate to plunge in. Even the dating apps are dominated by transvestites.

### **Advantages of lesbianism**

All these forces of power are required to force women into heterosexuality because there are great advantages to women in choosing lesbian relationships rather than heterosexual ones. Relating to someone with the same body is likely to be more sexually satisfying. There is unlikely to be coercion into unwanted sex in which women lie there being used while thinking of the next day's housework. Childcare and housework are likely to be shared. There is no need for protection against unwanted pregnancy or most sexually transmitted diseases which come from the penis. There is much less chance of violence and abuse. There is much greater chance of having interests in common and a close companionship with someone who is not trained from birth to have different and conflicting interests. Research suggests that men who marry or live in heterosexual relationships are healthier, happier and live longer than those who do not. The opposite is the case for women. This is a very attractive picture so there has to be the exercise of considerable force to ensure that women do not choose to be lesbians.

### **Lesbianism as a form of resistance**

As a result of all this force, lesbian feminists speak of heterosexuality as compulsory, and as a political institution. Those of us who made a political choice to reject men and moved towards loving women called ourselves 'political lesbians'. We made this choice in pursuit of personal happiness. But it was a political choice because we considered that women who withdrew from men to put all their energies into each other, the solution, rather than men, the problem, would be much better able to work for the overthrow of male domination. We hoped to undermine the institution of heterosexuality. This was a revolutionary development. With the women who had been lesbians all along, we created a culture and community that was hugely exciting and a powerful instrument of change.

We argued that women can choose to be lesbians, and many, many thousands did so. I was one of those, but most of the lesbians involved in lesbian feminism then, and that I still know now, chose their lesbianism. There were lesbians in lesbian feminism who did not feel they had chosen, lesbians who had known since they were young that they were attracted to women but both those who felt they had always known and those who had chosen all understood sexuality to be socially constructed and something that could be chosen.

We chose to be lesbians because we saw lesbianism as a form of resistance to male domination in itself. Our lesbianism refused men access, attention and deference. Our reward was the joy of loving women and integrating our personal and political lives. We put our love and attention into each other so as to build our revolutionary potential.

### **Eroticising equality**

Another idea that was fundamental to lesbian feminism is what I have called the eroticism of equality. Under male domination sexuality is at the basis of male power and it is socially constructed out of the power relations of male domination. It takes the form of eroticising women's subordination and men's power. It would be very surprising if that was not the case because it is the paradigm case of the expression of these power relations, the activity in which the organ which signifies a man's membership of the male sex caste is used to penetrate the genitals that signify a woman's membership of the subordinate sex caste. It is the activity which builds and maintains a man's sense of his status and women's sense of her subordinate status. The construction of sexuality around power relations is the very model for heterosexual sex and affects lesbians too.

In the 1980s a movement of lesbian and gay sadomasochism developed in the US. What was called lesbian sadomasochism arrived in the UK in the early 1980s with the publication of the collection *Coming to Power* from a lesbian sadomasochist group in San Francisco. It was a powerful and immensely destructive backlash to feminism and lesbian feminism. Instead of loving women which is at the heart of lesbian feminism, it promoted the excitements of humiliating and physically attacking women, saying this was women 'taking back their power'. We lesbian feminists fought back. We set up the group Lesbians against Sadomasochism and wrote and spoke against it and tried to keep the symbols of the sadomasochist movement, the swastikas, black leather Nazi caps, studs and chains out of our marches, discos and venues. Unfortunately, the movement had, by the 1980s, a viciously divisive and damaging effect on lesbian feminism and feminism by the late 1980s. I describe this in my book *The Lesbian Revolution* and in my memoir, *Trigger Warning*.

We understood in the 1980s and still do, that there can be no liberation of women without the creation of a sexuality of equality. Whilst men eroticise women's inequality and their own power women will continue to be sexually used and abused in everyday heterosexuality, in prostitution and pornography, and in all forms of sexual violence from sexual harassment to sex murder.

## **Rejection of femininity**

Lesbian feminists embrace equality in relationships too and entirely reject butch femme roleplaying. Butch and femme roleplaying is the way what is now called 'gender' and was once called sex role stereotypes can be expressed between women. 'Gender' is a result and a reflection of the power relations of male domination. In heterosexuality it creates a mild form of sadomasochism in which women are expected to be attracted to big strong masculine men and men to be attracted to feminine women crippled by high heels and showing naked body parts. Lesbian feminists, like radical feminists in general, understand masculinity to be the behaviour of male power and femininity to be the behaviour of female subordination. The rejection of sex role playing amongst lesbians was a basic building block of the lesbian feminism that began in the US in the early 1970s.

Many of the older lesbians who came to feminism at that time had experienced the grave restrictions placed upon lesbians by the roleplaying of butch and femme. When lesbians broke out of this culture and into feminism there was a huge sense of freedom. It was explained in early books by these lesbians such as *Sappho Was a Right On Woman* from 1972, as an imitation of the power structure of heterosexuality. These behaviours had been imitated by lesbians, they explained, because there was no alternative model for lesbian relationships and because they offered some safety. A couple who looked like a traditional man and woman in the street would not attract unwelcome attention as two women together might.

## **Lesbians and gay men have nothing in common.**

Another fundamental understanding of Lesbian feminism was that there were great political differences between lesbians and gay men. We considered that lesbians and gay men had little if anything in common. Lesbians are women and members of the oppressed sex class. Gay men are members of the oppressor class. In this way our interests are opposed. But gay men's relationship to women is different from that of heterosexual men. Gay men are taught to worship masculinity as everyone else in male supremacist culture is, and to despise women. But gay men are seen to lack masculinity themselves because they do not penetrate women. Gay male culture, therefore, embraces the default position, of subordinated and cringing effeminacy evident in drag. I don't want to suggest that all gay men subscribe to this culture. Indeed, at the time of gay liberation for a few years after the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, gay male activists were incisively critical of the adoption of sex roles and effeminacy by

their brothers. Some still are. But for the most part, there is celebration in the gay male community of those cultural forms such as camp and drag. These forms of effeminacy are about despising women.

Gay male, and now queer, culture is based upon the celebration of gay male sexual practice and this practice is created out of the power relations of male domination. Aggressive masculinity is worshipped through public sex and sadomasochism, pornography, prostitution and the sexual use of young men and boys. In all of these ways gay male and queer politics is on a collision course with the interests of women and this makes gay men into an influential part of the power structure of male domination.

Use of the term 'queer' to describe a politics developed in the very early 1990s out of AIDS activism. Male gay activists who came out onto the streets to protest the wave of anti-gay hatred that accompanied the AIDs epidemic used the term 'queer' to differentiate themselves from what they saw as an older generation of men who used the term 'gay'. They saw the older generation as too accommodating and not sufficiently confrontational for the moment of emergency that the new activists saw themselves to be confronting.

We lesbian feminists were horrified because queer politics clearly disappeared lesbians all over again. After decades of striving to establish lesbian pride, lesbians were subsumed under gay men and this was clear in the fact that immediately lesbians needed special words to describe them. Queer meant men and lesbians were queer women or female queers, adjectives were needed to modify the generic male of queer politics.

### **The situation today**

I now want to talk about the situation today. In the late 1980s and 1990s there was a great backlash against lesbian feminism which wiped out our movement. The forces involved in wiping it out included changing politics which removed the funding from women's and lesbian resources, the rise of the sadomasochist movement which overthrew all the work by lesbian feminists to change male sexuality and create an eroticism of equality, the development of problematic gay male practices that celebrated aggressive masculinity into 'queer' politics which was immensely hostile to feminism and to lesbians, and a general antifeminist backlash. Another force was the commercialisation of homosexuality. Lesbian feminism was not suited to being commercialised. As a result, the point has been reached today where the word lesbian and the concept

of being a lesbian have been almost eliminated in the queer culture into which young lesbians come out. They are likely to encounter a culture that has been entirely queered, and has not a trace, no historical memory of lesbianism, not even in a homeopathic sense. There is no model for lesbianism as a form of resistance to male domination.

### **Political lesbianism**

Part of the backlash against lesbian feminism consists of the fury of many lesbians today at the very idea of political lesbianism, the idea that lesbianism can be a choice. Many now see it as homophobic to say lesbianism is not innate, biological and fixed at birth. But this idea and the antifeminist and antilesbian politics that it represents are the product of a particular stage in history.

Women's ideas about what lesbianism is and how they became lesbians change according to wider historical forces. A PhD student of mine, Lorene Gottschalk, researched what women in three different time cohorts thought about the origins of their lesbianism. Lesbians who came out as lesbians in the 1970s mostly said they chose to be lesbians. Lesbians who came out in the 1980s were equally balanced between those who said they chose and those who thought their lesbianism was biological. Lesbians who came out in the 1990s mostly thought they were controlled by their biology. Women think about themselves and what they do in the language and concepts available to them at the time. Now, we are in a very biologistic time when everything is explained by biology so that even talking of 'becoming' a lesbian, rather than being born that way, is seen as heresy. This biologism is mirrored in the language about transgenderism and particularly the transgenering of children. The medical profession has been forced to adopt the language of 'affirmation', i.e. a child is biologically transgender and the physician must simply recognise and agree to this. Similarly, some lesbians say that they simply are, by birth and biology, lesbians, and any argument to the contrary is a form of verbal violence against them.

In order to create a strong and effective lesbian and feminist revolution we need to be consistent in our understanding of how 'gender' whether that of lesbian roleplaying or in heterosexuality is constructed and how sexuality is constructed too. Arguments as to innateness and biology are designed to prevent criticism, prevent the development of ideas and prevent revolutionary change.

### **Roleplaying**

Another aspect of the backlash is the reaffirmation of butch/femme roleplaying. The rejection of 'gender' or what we called sex role stereotypes was so vital to the very possibility of a feminist movement that many of us old lesbian



feminists were horrified to see a rebirth of lesbian butch/femme roleplaying. Roleplaying was rehabilitated as an aspect of the sadomasochist movement in the late 1980s. The excitement of butch and femme was one of power difference and this is clear from the pornography that the roleplayers created. As feminism suffered from a huge backlash against us in the 1990s and into the 2000s, there was a falling back, in the US in particular, into roleplaying among some lesbians. Presently the promotion of roleplaying has reached the point where there have been regular conferences in the US. There are conferences for femmes, which are very much about the sex industry and which transvestites attend pretending to be femme lesbians. There are conferences for butches, which valorise masculinity, calling the lesbians who attend, 'masculine of centre', which implies that though they are women, they are masculine at heart.

The result of the movement back to roleplaying is that many lesbians, particularly in the US today, call themselves 'butches' and they say this has nothing to do with men and male power. The 'always have beens' and the butches are often one and the same. They see 'butchness' as synonymous with authentic lesbianism. In this picture the 'femmes' seem to disappear, but, of course, butch is part of a binary and the other half of the binary is femme. You can't have one without the other. Today 'butch' is promoted as just a word for real lesbians. Who knows where the 'femmes' have gone. There are butch magazines and fashion shows, and photo albums. They are all just lesbians but have given themselves this powerful name, butch, because it means masculinity. They see themselves as innately butch.

The lesbians who call themselves 'butch' look exactly like the lesbian feminists of the 1970s and 80s except that they smile less in photographs than we used to. But, at that time, we saw the word butch as an insult. We were nothing to do with men, just women exercising our freedom, throwing off femininity and having a revolution.

The way the notion of butch has not just returned but claims to represent lesbianism and dominates areas of lesbian culture is very disturbing. It serves to divide lesbians and we cannot have a lesbian or feminist revolution if we are divided amongst ourselves. Instead of all lesbians working together and seeing themselves as having a common cause, lesbians are divided into real ones and imitations, the powerful and the powerless. The 'butch' lesbians are divided from the older generation of lesbians who rejected roleplaying too. We are derided and seen as just absurd, and of course, not real ones, not authentic. It prevents us coming together and prevents revolutionary change.

Roleplaying lesbians appeal to innateness in just the way transvestites do to promote their gender ideology. 'Gender' needs to be abolished, not rescued and polished up by lesbians. If we accept, as feminists generally do, that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed behaviours that represent the statuses of up and down in a hierarchy, then 'Butch' needs to go just as much as transvestite or any other forms of sex stereotyping or 'gender' do. The notion of innate butchness serves male domination and stands firmly in the way of feminist or lesbian revolution. Lesbian feminism is based in equality between women, the eroticism of equality and the abolition of the hierarchy of gender.

### **Rebuilding lesbian feminism**

Today lesbian feminism has been so utterly destroyed that the ideas, the language and institutions are barely known about. There is little pride now in using the word lesbian. Rather young women as well as lesbian celebrities who could have been role models, are desperately trying to conceal their lesbianism under words such as bisexual, queer, non-binary or even transgender. The word lesbian itself is under threat. This could seem like a hopeless situation but already a lesbian feminist movement of resistance is being rebuilt. It is being rebuilt here in Spain too.

A new lesbian feminist movement is necessary for many reasons. One is for the sake of women's freedom. Women need to have the freedom to leave heterosexuality and to live outside its constraints. We need to have the choice, the joy, of loving women, of enjoying the companionship of women all our lives and avoiding male sexual demands and violence and the demands to service men emotionally and by deference. Another reason is that lesbians have always been the beating heart of the women's liberation movement. We can afford to be revolutionaries because we do not have to be afraid of offending male partners or family members, our minds are free and we can imagine a new future. Also, we have more time because we are liberated by not having to be servants to men in the home. Lesbians are a powerful force. We ignite and support a fiery resistance to male domination and without us feminism cannot thrive and grow.