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# The Connection Between Homophobia and Violence Against Women

by Suzanne Pharr

- I. *Male violence against women comes from an imbalance and misuse of power, from dominance and control. It is based on a system of inequity in which there is a belief in gender-based superiority/inferiority.*

Through our work in the battered women's movement we have developed an analysis of male violence against women that goes beyond some of the simpler explanations of violence. We do not view it as being caused by undue stress, the influence of alcohol or drugs, the result of childhood violence, mental illness, etc. What we have seen in our work is that violence against women is directly related to the condition of women in a society that refuses them equal pay, equal access to resources, and equal status with males. From this condition comes the confirmation of the male sense of ownership of women, their power over women, and their right to control women for their own means. The violence of men is fed, then, by their sense of their right to dominate and control, and their sense of superiority over a group of people who because of gender are supposedly inferior to them.

Those of us who believe this to be a battered women's movement (and not just a collection of service providing agencies) have known for a decade or more that if our goal is to end violence against women, then we have to provide more than safe space and service: we have to work for women's rights and equality on all fronts. We understand the relationship of pay inequity to violence, of unpaid household work to violence, of single gender (male) history and literature books to violence, of the entire system of unequal treatment to violence: this lack of equality supports male dominance and control. We know that until women find fair and equal treatment under the law, men will continue to consider it their right to dominate and control.

Given women's economic dependence upon men and male systems, we find it frightening and difficult to step out of line to seek freedom and equality, to change all of society's institutions that keep us from gaining our rights and our power. For our safety we are encouraged to curtail activities that could possibly threaten the protection and acceptance some women get from males and male institutions. Hence, many women feel too much at risk to speak and work in their own behalf and are consequently easily threatened by male disapproval, i.e. society's disapproval. Inequality thrives on the oppressed group's intimidation.

- II. *Inequality between the sexes is fed by sex role stereotyping which begins at birth and continues through life. From the time we are very young, we are taught that there are different proper behaviors expected from each sex, and though the women's movement has worked hard to raise consciousness about these differences, these behaviors are still enforced in a child's life. We still see young boys encouraged to be directive, self-asserting, career-oriented, and young girls are taught to be accommodating, pleasing, indirect, and family-oriented (with perhaps a career thrown in on the side).*

Women are taught that to be directive, self-assertive, career-oriented is to be not womanly, feminine, acceptable to men—and therefore they might lose what little power and privilege that has been granted them. The myth is that for a woman to maintain roles—to be a pleaser, a giver, a nurturer, a supporter who demands little for herself—is to be repaid with a man to provide authority over her life, financial security, decision-making, and direction. To eschew roles is to be cut adrift, to be without order, to be

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out of proper boundaries, to be someone who gets in the way of the flow of society and the acceptable routinized order of relationships. The person who thinks that she should be able to accomplish whatever she is capable of instead of what is expected of her is a threat to society: she has stepped out of line. To know no artificial sense of boundaries gives a heady sense of freedom, a sense of release, of joy, and once one knows it, she has to be intimidated if she's to get back in line again: she must be controlled. She must be taught that she will suffer significant losses if she stays out there in those free, open spaces.

*III. Two primary enforcers of sex role stereotyping are homophobia (irrational fear and hatred of homosexuals) and heterosexism (the use of sexual identity for dominance and privilege).*

It is not by chance that when children approach puberty and increased sexual awareness they begin to taunt each other by calling these names: "queer," "faggot," "pervert." Children know what we have taught them, and we have given clear messages that those who deviate from standard expectations are to be made to get back in line. The best controlling tactic at puberty is to be treated as an outsider, to be ostracized at a time when it feels most vital to conform. Those who are different must be made to suffer loss. It is also at puberty that misogyny begins to be more apparent, and girls are pressured to conform to societal norms that do not permit them to realize their full potential.

There was a time when the two most condemning accusations against a woman to ostracize her were "whore" and "lesbian." The sexual revolution and changing attitudes about heterosexual behavior may have led to a lessening of the power of the word whore. However, the word lesbian is still fully charged and carries with it the full threat of loss of power and privilege, the threat of being cut asunder, abandoned, and left outside society's protection.

To be a lesbian is to be perceived as someone who has stepped out of line, who has moved out of sexual/economic dependence on men, who is woman-identified. A lesbian is perceived as someone who can live without men, who is therefore (however illogically) against men. A lesbian is perceived as being outside the acceptable, routine-ized order of things. A lesbian is perceived as someone who has no societal institutions to protect her and who is not privileged to the protection of individual males. A lesbian is perceived as someone who stands in contradiction of the sacrifices heterosexual women have made. A lesbian is perceived as a threat.

Lesbian-baiting is an attempt to control women by calling them lesbians because their behavior is not acceptable, that is when they are being independent, going their own way, fighting for their rights, demanding equal pay, saying no to violence, being self-assertive, bonding with and loving the company of women, assuming the right to their bodies, insisting upon their own authority, making changes that include them in society's decision-making; lesbian-baiting occurs when women are called lesbians because they have stepped out of line. It is successful when women in their fear jump back in line, dance whatever dance is necessary for acceptability.

The dance women dance to keep the privilege offered conditionally by males is that of proper role, of behaving in such a way that does not threaten the status of men. They tone down, reduce their work or activities in order to be safe. And the conditions for privilege can change at any time. How many of us have heard battered women's stories about their abusers calling them lesbians or calling the battered women's shelter a lesbian place? The abuser is not so much labeling her a lesbian as he is warning her that she is choosing to be outside society's protection (from male institutions) and she therefore should choose to be with him and what is right. He recognizes the power in woman bonding and fears loss of her servitude and loyalty: the potential loss of his control. The concern is not affectional/sexual identity; the concern is disloyalty. The labeling is a threat.

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And the threat is a real one, for women observe the penalties society places on lesbians when possible: loss of community, loss of job and economic security, loss of children, loss of family, loss of church, and sometimes loss of life. Such is the cost of stepping out of line, out of role, and seeking one's own empowerment. Women fear these losses, and to avoid them, many women not only refuse to recognize and support lesbians but they do self-negating things to maintain approval and protection. Entire industries are built around women's needs to stay within approved, dictated roles. Observe the fashion industry and the cosmetic industry, for two examples. Consider whatever motivated women to put on a pair of pointed-toe shoes with three-inch spiked heels. Was it comfort?

IV. *Freedom to be who we are (and all of who we are), to control our own lives, is the issue.*

At issue here is not whether women can wear makeup and high fashion and still be independent and free; at issue is whether women make choices against their best interests of independence and freedom in order to gain approval and protection at a high cost. At issue here is not that all women should be lesbians in order to be independent and free, but that qualities of independence and freedom and self-empowerment, through the strategy of lesbian-baiting, are identified with lesbians and that all of us as women need to look at what blocks our empowerment and in particular our response to lesbian-baiting. At issue is not our sexual identity but our freedom.

We need to examine our failures to assert ourselves, to demand our equality. Women working in shelters sometimes in fear agree to provide services only and not to talk about and work for lasting social change; sometimes they agree to serve only acceptable women—lesbians, differently-abled women, women of color, older women, prostitutes need not apply. These women would cause disturbances within the shelter, the community, and we would lose approval, funding, etc. Other women have fear of organizations that advocate change for women; they accept the notion that to work for the empowerment of women is to present oneself as a manhater. From fear, women lose. And what do we lose? We lost the freedom to be who we are, and therefore some of our essential humanness.

Our concern with homophobia, then, is not just that it damages lesbians but that it damages all women. We recognize homophobia as one means of controlling women, and we recognize the connection between control and violence. Homophobia keeps us from stepping out of line and getting into the movement for freedom. If not a single lesbian worked in a shelter or came to a shelter for services, we still would have to work to eliminate homophobia because we know how it is used to disempower women and keep us vulnerable to violence and abuse. To work against homophobia is to work against violence against all women.

Excerpt from Elliott, P. (Ed.) (1990). *Confronting Lesbian Battering*. St. Paul, MN: Lesbian Battering Intervention Project of the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women.