

11

Ending Female Sexual Oppression

During the early stages of contemporary feminist movement, women's liberation was often equated with sexual liberation. On the cover of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (one of the most widely read feminist works in the '70s), the book is described as "the ultimate word on sexual freedom." On the back cover, Greer is described as "a woman with a sense of humor who is proud of her sexuality." (Germaine Greer's work *Sex and Destiny* is an interesting rethinking of the politics of fertility that challenges many notions of sexual freedom for women advocated by the author in her earlier work.) Feminist thinkers like Greer believed that assertion of the primacy of sexuality would be a liberatory gesture. They urged women to initiate sexual advances, to enjoy sex, to experiment with new relationships, to be sexually "free." Yet most women did not have the leisure, the mobility, the contacts, or even the desire to indulge in this so-called "sexual liberation." Young heterosexual women, single and childless; teenagers and college students; and political progressives were the groups most eager and able to pattern their sexual behavior after what was essentially an inversion of the male notion of sexual liberation. Advocating genuine sexual liberty was positive, and women learned from experience that the freedom to initiate sexual relationships; to be non-monogamous; to experiment with group sex, sexualized sadomasochism, etc. could sometimes be exciting and pleasurable; it did not, however, deconstruct the power relations between men and women in the sexual sphere. Many women felt disillusioned with the idea of sexual liberation. While some participants in feminist circles continued to emphasize the importance of sexual freedom, rejecting the idea that it should be patterned after a male model, a larger contingent, heterosexual and lesbian, began to denounce the idea of sexual freedom and even of sexual contact with men because they felt women were still exploited by the old sexual paradigms. Increasingly, these feminists came to see male sexuality as disgusting and necessarily exploitive of women.

Whether or not sexual freedom should be a feminist issue is currently a much-debated topic. (Since the writing of this chapter much new feminist writing discussing sexuality has emerged, including *Loving in the War Years*, by Cherrie Moraga; *Powers of Desire*, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Starisell, and Sharon Thompson; *Female Desire*, by Rosalind Coward; and *Sex and Love*, edited by Sue Cartledge and Joanna Ryan; to name a few.) Concluding her essay "Sexuality as the Mainstay of Identity: Psychoanalytic Perspectives," Ethel Person writes:

In sum, then, sexual liberation, while important and even crucial to some individuals, has significant limitations as social critique and political policy. At its worst, sexual liberation is part of the cult of individuality which only demands legitimation of the expression of the individual's need, what appears to be her raw "impulse" life, against the demands of society without considering a political reordering of the social order itself. The achievement of the conditions necessary to female autonomy is a precondition for authentic sexual liberation.

Person does not add that rethinking sexuality, changing the norms of sexuality, is a pre-condition for female sexual autonomy; therefore sexuality, and by implication "sexual freedom," is an important, relevant issue for feminist politics.

It has been a simple task for women to describe and criticize negative aspects of sexuality as it has been socially constructed in sexist society; to expose male objectification and dehumanization of women; to denounce rape, pornography, sexualized violence, incest, etc. It has been a far more difficult task for women to envision new sexual paradigms, to change the norms of sexuality. The inspiration for such work can only emerge in an environment where sexual well-being is valued. Ironically, some feminists have tended to dismiss issues of sexual pleasure, well-being, and contentedness as irrelevant. Contemporary emphasis on sexual revolution or anything-goes sexual expression has led many women and men to assume that sexual freedom already exists and is even overvalued in our society. However, this is *not* a culture that affirms real sexual freedom. Criticizing the assumption that this is a sexually liberated society because there is an absence of many restrictions, Ellen Willis asserts in her essay “Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution”:

From a radical standpoint, then, sexual liberation involves not only the abolition of restrictions but the positive presence of social and psychological conditions that foster satisfying sexual relations. And from that standpoint, this culture is still deeply repressive. Most obviously, sexual inequality and the resulting antagonism between men and women constitute a devastating barrier to sexual happiness. I will argue in addition that, sexual liberalism notwithstanding, most children’s upbringing produces adults with profoundly negative attitudes towards sex. Under these conditions, the relaxation of sexual restrictions leads people to try desperately to overcome the obstacles to satisfaction through compulsive sexual activity and preoccupation with sex. The emphasis on sex that currently permeates our public life—especially the enormous demands for sexual advice and therapy—attest not to our sexual freedom but to our continuing sexual frustration.

Feminist activists who see male sexuality as inherently despicable have been those most willing to de-emphasize issues of sexual freedom. Focusing solely on those aspects of male sexual expression that have to do with reinforcing male domination of women, they are reluctant and downright unwilling to acknowledge that sexuality as it is constructed in sexist society is no more “liberating” for men than it is for women (even though it is obviously oppressive to women in ways that are not oppressive to men). Willis argues that recognition of “sexual destructiveness can be seen as a perversion that both reflects and perpetuates a repressive system” so that it is possible “to envision a coherent feminist politics in which a commitment to sexual freedom plays an integral part.” Sexual freedom can exist only when individuals are no longer oppressed by a socially constructed sexuality based on biologically determined definitions of sexuality: repression, guilt, shame, dominance, conquest, and exploitation. To set the stage for the development of that sexual freedom, feminist movement must continue to focus on ending female sexual oppression.

The focus on “sexual liberation” has always carried with it the assumption that the goal of such effort is to make it possible for individuals to engage in more and/or better sexual activity. Yet one aspect of sexual norms that many people find oppressive is the assumption that one “should” be engaged in sexual activity. This “should” is one expression of sexual coercion. Advocates of sexual liberation often imply that any individual who is not concerned about the quality of their experience or exercising greater sexual freedom is mentally disturbed or sexually repressed. When primary emphasis is placed on ending sexual oppression rather than on sexual liberation, it is possible to envision a society in which it is as much an expression of sexual freedom to choose not to participate in sexual activity as it is to choose to participate.

Sexual norms as they are currently socially constructed have always privileged active sexual expression over sexual desire. To act sexually is deemed natural, normal; to not act, unnatural, abnormal. Such thinking corresponds with sexist role patterning. Men are socialized to act

sexually, women not to act (or to simply react to male sexual advances). Women's liberationists' insistence that women should be sexually active as a gesture of liberation helped free female sexuality from the restraints imposed upon it by repressive double standards, but it did not remove the stigma attached to sexual inactivity. Until that stigma is removed, women and men will not feel free to participate in sexual activity when they desire. They will continue to respond to coercion, either the sexist coercion that pushes young men to act sexually to prove their "masculinity" (i.e., their heterosexuality) or the sexual coercion that compels young women to respond to such advances to prove their "femininity" (i.e., their willingness to be heterosexual sex objects). The removal of the social stigma attached to sexual inactivity would amount to a change in sexual norms. It would have many positive implications for women and men, especially teenagers, who are at this historical moment most likely to be victimized by sexist sexual norms. Recent focus on sex between heterosexual teenagers indicates that coercion remains a central motivation for participation in sexual activity. Girls "do it for the boy," as one seventeen-year-old daughter told her mother (quoted in Ellen Goodman's essay "The Turmoil of Teenage Sexuality"), and boys do it to prove to other boys that they are heterosexual and that they can exert "masculine" power over girls.

Feminist movement to eradicate heterosexism—compulsory heterosexuality—is central to efforts to end sexual oppression. In the introduction to *No Turning Back: Lesbian and Gay Liberation of the '80s*, Gerre Goodman, George Lakey, Judy Lakey, and Erika Thorne define heterosexism as the:

suppression and denial of homosexuality with the assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual and, second, a belief in the inherent superiority of the dominant-male/passive-female role pattern. Heterosexism results in compulsory heterosexuality which cripples the free expression and mutually supportive relationships of heterosexuals as well as of lesbians and gay men.

Within the feminist movement lesbian women have worked hardest to call attention to the struggle to end heterosexist oppression. Lesbians have been on both sides of the larger sexual-liberation debate. They have shown many heterosexual women that their prejudices against lesbians support and perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality. They have also shown women that we can find emotional and mutual sexual fulfillment in relationships with one another. Some lesbians have suggested that homosexuality may be the most direct expression of pro-sex politics, since it is unconnected to procreation. Feminist movement to end female sexual oppression is linked to lesbian liberation. The struggle to end prejudice, exploitation, and oppression of lesbians and gay men is a crucial feminist agenda. It is a necessary component of the movement to end female sexual oppression. Affirming lesbianism, women of varied sexual preferences resist the perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality.

Throughout feminist movement, there has been a tendency to make the struggle to end sexual oppression a competition: heterosexuality versus lesbianism. Early in the movement, attempts to exclude and silence lesbians were justified through the specter of a "lavender menace." Later, lesbianism was presented as a choice that would eliminate the need to deal with issues of heterosexual conflict or as the most politically correct choice for a feminist woman. Even though many feminists acknowledge that fighting sexual oppression, particularly male domination of women, is not the same as man-hating, within feminist gatherings and organizations intense anti-male sentiments are sometimes expressed by heterosexual women and lesbians alike, and women who are not lesbians, who may or may not be in relationships with men, feel that they are not "real" feminists. This is especially true of women who may support feminism but who do not publicly support lesbian rights. It is often forgotten that we are all in the process of developing

radical political consciousness, that it is a “process,” and that it defeats efforts to build solidarity to condemn or judge women politically incorrect when they do not immediately support all the issues we deem relevant.

The suggestion that the truly feminist woman is lesbian (made by heterosexuals and lesbians alike) sets up another sexual standard by which women are to be judged and found wanting. Although it is not common for women in the feminist movement to state that women should be lesbian, the message is transmitted via discussions of heterosexuality that suggest all genital contact between women and men is rape, that the woman who is emotionally and sexually committed to an individual man is necessarily incapable of loyal, woman-identified political commitment. Just as the struggle to end sexual oppression aims to eliminate heterosexism, it should not endorse any one sexual choice: celibacy, bisexuality, homosexuality, or heterosexuality. Feminist activists need to remember that the political choices we make are not determined by whom we choose to have genital sexual contact with. In her introduction to *Home Girls: Black Feminist Anthology*, Barbara Smith asserts: “Black feminism and Black Lesbianism are not interchangeable. Feminism is a political movement, and many Lesbians are not feminists.” This is also true for many heterosexual women. It is important for women, especially those who are heterosexual, to know that they can make a radical political commitment to feminist struggle even though they are sexually involved with men (many of us know from experience that political choice will undoubtedly alter the nature of individual relationships). All women need to know that they can be politically committed to feminism regardless of their sexual preference. They need to know that the goal of feminist movement is not to establish codes for a “politically correct” sexuality. Politically, feminist activists committed to ending sexual oppression must work to eliminate the oppression of lesbians and gay men as part of an overall movement to enable all women (and men) to freely choose sexual partners.

Feminist activists must take care that our legitimate critiques of heterosexism are not attacks on heterosexual *practice*. As feminists, we must confront those women who do in fact believe that women with heterosexual preferences are either traitors or likely to be anti-lesbian. Condemnation of heterosexual practice has led women who desire sexual relationships with men to feel they cannot participate in feminist movement. They have gotten the message that to be “truly” feminist is not to be heterosexual. It is easy to confuse support for non-oppressive heterosexual practice with the belief in heterosexism. For example, responding to a statement in *Ain't I a Woman* that said, “Attacking heterosexuality does little to strengthen the self-concept of the masses of women who desire to be with men,” lesbian feminist Cheryl Clarke writes in her essay “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community”:

Hooks delivers a backhanded slap at lesbian feminists, a considerable number of whom are black. Hooks would have done well to attack the institution of heterosexuality, as it is a prime cause of black women's oppression in America.

Clearly Clarke misunderstands and misinterprets my point. I made no reference to heterosexism, and it is the equation of heterosexual practice with heterosexism that makes it appear that Clarke is attacking the practice itself and not only heterosexism. My point is that feminism will never appeal to a mass-based group of women in our society who are heterosexual if they think that they will be looked down upon or seen as doing something wrong. My comment was not intended to reflect in any way on lesbians, because they are not the only group of feminists that criticizes and in some cases condemns all heterosexual practice.

Just as feminist movement to end sexual oppression should create a social climate in which lesbians and gay men are no longer oppressed, a climate in which their sexual choices are affirmed, it should also create a climate in which heterosexual practice is freed from the constraints of heterosexism and can also be affirmed. One of the practical reasons for doing this is the recognition that the advancement of feminism as a political movement depends on the involvement of masses of women, a vast majority of whom are heterosexual. As long as feminist women (be they celibate, lesbian, heterosexual, etc.) condemn male sexuality, and by extension women who are involved sexually with men, feminist movement is undermined. Useless and unnecessary divisions are created. Concurrently, as long as any pro-heterosexuality statement is read as a hidden attack upon homosexuality, we continue to perpetuate the idea that these are, and should be, competing sexualities. It is possible to delineate the positive or negative aspects of lesbianism without referring in any way to heterosexuality, and vice versa. Although Ellen Willis does not in her essay discuss the notion that lesbianism is a more politically correct sexual choice for feminist women, or that this represents yet another attempt to impose on women a sexual standard, her comments about neo-Victorian logic apply to attacks on female sexual contact with men:

Neo-Victorians have also undermined feminist opposition to the right, by equating feminism with their own sexual attitudes, in effect reading out of the movement any woman who disagrees with them. Since their notion of proper feminist sexuality echoes conventional moral judgments and the anti-sexual propaganda presently coming from the right their guilt-mongering has been quite effective. Many feminists who are aware that their sexual feelings contradict the neo-Victorian ideal have lapsed into confused and apologetic silence. No doubt there are also thousands of women who have quietly concluded that if this ideal is feminism, then feminism has nothing to do with them. The result is widespread apathy, dishonesty, and profound disunity in a movement faced with a determined enemy that is threatening its very existence.

A feminist movement that aims to eliminate sexist oppression, and in that context sexual oppression, cannot ignore or dismiss the choice women make to be heterosexual. Despite heterosexism, many women have acknowledged and accepted that they do not have to be heterosexual (that there are other options) and have chosen to be exclusively or primarily heterosexual. Their choices should be respected. By choosing they exercise sexual freedom. Their choices may not, as those who oppose them suggest, be influenced by heterosexual privilege. Most heterosexual privilege is diminished when compared to the degree of exploitation and oppression a woman is likely to encounter in most heterosexual relationships. There are exceptions. Many women choose to be heterosexual because they enjoy genital contact with individual men. Feminist movement has enriched and added new dimensions to lesbian sexuality, and there is no reason it cannot do the same for heterosexuality. Women with heterosexual preferences need to know that feminism is a political movement that does not negate their choices even as it offers a framework to challenge and oppose male sexual exploitation of women.

There are some feminists (and I am one) who believe that feminist movement to end sexual oppression will not change destructive sexual norms if individuals are taught that they must choose between competing sexualities (the most obvious being heterosexuality and homosexuality) and conform to the expectations of the chosen norm. Sexual desire has varied and multiple dimensions and is rarely as “exclusive” as any norm would suggest. A liberatory sexuality would not teach women to see their bodies as accessible to all men, or to all women, for that matter. It would favor instead a sexuality that is open or closed based on the nature of individual interaction. Implicit in the idea of sexual preference is the assumption that anyone of

the preferred sex can seek access to one's body. This is a concept that promotes objectification. In a heterosexual context it makes everyone, especially women, into sex objects. Given the power differential created by sexist politics, women are likely to be approached by any man since all men are taught to assume they should have access to the bodies of all women. Sexuality would be transformed if the codes and labels that strip sexual desire of its specificity and particularity were abandoned. As Stephen Heath summarized in *The Sexual Fix*:

The end of oppression is a recasting of social relations that leaves men and women free, outside of any commodification of the sexual, removed from any of the violence and alienation of circulation and exchange as a sexual identity, the identity of a sex, being fixed to this or that image, this or that norm, to this thing "sexuality."

Though labeled "heterosexual," many women in this society feel little sexual desire for men because of the politics of sexual oppression; male domination destroys and perverts that desire. It is the enormity of acts of sexual oppression imposed on women by men that has made it difficult for women to speak of positive sexual interactions with men. Increasingly, feminist women who are heterosexual are making the point that they choose to have a relationship with an individual man and resist the heterosexist notion that they welcome or are open to the sexual advances of any male. This action attacks the compulsory heterosexuality that denies women the right to choose male sexual partners by evaluating whether such interactions support and affirm them. Asserting their right to choose, women challenge the assumption that female sexuality exists to serve the sexual needs of men. Their efforts enhance the struggle to end sexual oppression. The right to choose must characterize all sexual interactions between individuals.

A shift that will undoubtedly emerge as the struggle to end sexual oppression progresses will be decreased obsession with sexuality. This does not necessarily mean that there will be decreased sexual activity. It means that sexuality will no longer have the importance attributed to it in a society that uses sexuality for the express purposes of maintaining gender inequality, male domination, consumerism, and the sexual frustration and unhappiness that deflect attention away from the need to make social revolution. As Stephen Heath comments:

The real problem and task is always one of social revolution. Privileging the sexual has nothing necessarily liberating about it at all; indeed, it functions only too easily as an instance by development of and reference to which society guarantees its order outside of any effective process of transformation, produces precisely a containing area and ideology of "revolution" or "liberation."

Feminist efforts to develop a political theory of sexuality must continue if sexist oppression is to be eliminated. Yet we must keep in mind that the struggle to end sexual oppression is only one component of a larger struggle to transform society and establish a new social order.