

SEXUAL ORIENTATION
A Gendered Perspective

Object-ed

Sexual orientation and feminism both make challenges to the dominant understanding of gender. Gender power and gender stereotyping work to support the dominant patriarchy, by keeping people 'in their place' and understand gender as a binary construct. The gender binary asserts that the biological differences between women and men create natural and immutable differences that result in specific gender related characteristics, which are used to explain, condone and support the dominance of men over women. Feminism denies that the difference in biology between women and men is indicative of anything but different functions in the reproductive process, and people who identify as LGB deny that ones biological sex determines sexual attraction and orientation or how a person understands and expresses their sexuality and/or gender. Heteronormativity is the assertion that heterosexual orientations, relationships, sex and expressions of gender are 'normal', anything else is an aberration. Heteronormativity is a construct of patriarchy and works to limit and oppress 'invalid' expressions of gender and sexuality. Therefore women (and men) who assert that women are equal to men and people who assert that it is a normal expression of gender and sexual orientation to be attracted to people of the same sex fall outwith this construct. Gay and lesbian couples who choose not to adopt traditional gender roles, the increase in the diversity of expressions of sexual orientation and sexuality and the fluidity of identity apparent in bisexuality strengthens the argument that gender roles (and the subsequent inequalities and discriminations on which they are based) are social constructs and can shift or become redundant. Such a shift or breakdown of the social construct of gender and assumed binary norms would be of great value to obtaining greater equality for women, and the merit of linking equalities thinking for LGB people and women on this issue is reflected in the strong links between early feminism and lesbianism.

The prevalence of heteronormativity limits and controls what images of sexuality and sexual orientation are allowed into the mainstream. Representations that foster the idea that LGB people are an ordinary part of our societal fabric are resisted, and it is frequently argued that the most innocuous representations of gay people are attempts to get 'gay sex' on the

agenda. This is because the conceptual link between homosexuality and sex is very strong, and this over sexualisation and focus on male:male sex has arguably been fostered as a means of curtailing the discussion of sexual orientation in schools and in society at large. The fact that sex education is different to allowing there to be different representations of the family and demonstrating that there are more than just heterosexual people in the world is lost in the argument. This kind of thinking has allowed sexuality to be reduced to the binary and heterosexual male and female norm which bears no relation to the reality of sexual identities, orientations and behaviours that manifest in our society. Similarly resistance to the sexual objectification of women aims to break the conceptual link between women and sex (in terms of women being passive objects of sexual desire). Just as women are frequently reduced to sexual objects, the relationships between LGB couples are reduced to the act of sex. Just as a woman's mind and capabilities are superseded by her body, so the sex lives of gay people eclipse all of their other actions and interactions. These conceptual links, alongside the widespread use of detrimental and stereotypical images of women and LGB people, and the heterosexist values and assumptions that infringe upon LGB and women's rights need to be challenged to allow the true range of gender and sexual identities to flourish.

The extent that patriarchy and hetero-dominance (heterosexism) control our assumptions about people and even our daily lives is illustrated by the fact that LGB people don't only come out once as LGB but have to continually come out in their day to day discourse with the people that they meet. And women who are unhappy with sexism in our society have to 'out' themselves as feminists on a daily basis. Just as people generally assume that others are heterosexual, many people expect that most women are not feminists or are not unhappy with the balance of power amongst the sexes. Both groups face assumptions and widely held beliefs that directly discriminate against and challenge (both overtly and covertly) their understanding of the world and because of this their sense of well-being, belonging and worth.

The oppression of and overt discrimination against both women and LGB people has lessened over recent years. A growing intolerance of overtly homophobic and sexist language and attitudes, and the introduction of legislation that aims to ensure equality across a range of issues and settings such as equality of opportunity in the workplace or equal access and quality of care from the NHS, have been important factors in the challenge to homophobic and sexist discrimination. However, these and other improvements for women and LGB people, which have seen an increase in visibility and acceptance for both groups in our society across a widening field of opportunity, are not the whole picture; to pick up and extend upon the earlier examples, there is still a significant gender pay gap and the glass ceiling has been cracked but not broken; and LGB awareness training may be given to a high percentage of NHS staff but health outcomes for LGB people as a group are still lower than for heterosexual people. The creation and implementation of legislation and the prevailing trend of improvement creates a false sense of progress and the sense that the imbalance and the discrimination have been addressed. There seems to be a 'foot-off-the-pedal syndrome' once legislation is in place, yet many areas and opportunities remain closed off to women and LGB people, and one of the ways that this will remain the case is through people being allowed to gloss over the rule by pointing to the exceptions. A significant problem when in reality, there are still far too many rules than exceptions for both women and LGB people. The idea that feminism and feminist arguments are anachronistic has gained significant ground in the past decade. Changing attitudes and legislative protection have worked to mask enduring inequalities and the increasing sexualisation of women and girls and LGB people and increasing levels of violence towards these groups clearly shows that discrimination is still rife for women and LGB people. There is definite scope for and value in both equalities strands working together to find out how to push the equalities agenda on to the parts of inequality and discrimination that endure beyond changes in policy and legislation and attitudinal improvements in society.

Gay men are leading a lot of the policy work and discourse that is being undertaken across the country

on LGB issues and this is reflected in the direction that the legislation is being developed. This mirrors women's experience of the male agenda dictating what, where and how issues relating to gender are discussed; even if only because feminism has had to respond to the most significant forms and manifestations of discrimination which are dictated by the structures of patriarchy. One of the main battles that women have had to fight is the right to be heard and to make change, and because power structures through politics, education, the media etc. are owned and controlled predominantly by men, they have had to fight both for men to hear them and to let them be heard. Lesbian women are now facing the same struggle for representation and space in LGB work. It has been suggested that the gay men who have taken the lead in the LGB sector are predominantly white and middle class and behave in a very heteronormative way in meetings, and so are seen as less threatening because they convey the dominant norms in the workplace even if they digress in their personal lives. But more importantly the privileging of these men in the LGB sector reinforces the patriarchal power structures that result in the discrimination of women and LGB people. Redressing the power imbalance in the LGB sector could provide direction to redressing the power balance in the public arena between women and men on all issues.

Despite the (prurient) acceptance of lesbian women in our society in comparison with, for example, the elevated levels of violence faced by gay men, there are many ways in which lesbian women face a double discrimination for being both women and gay. Women who are gay and move up the male dominated hierarchies of power, or undertake work that makes them visible in the public sphere, may be more reticent to come out as gay when they are already facing discrimination for being female and powerful. Anecdotally within the public sector arena for example there are far more gay men who are in high positions and are out, than lesbian women. The higher numbers of powerful and out gay men in the workplace creates a problem for gay women – people point to the numbers of gay men to assert that a problem has been solved, but miss the point that it has only improved in the main for straight-acting, middle class gay men. Gay women

are still facing more workplace discrimination because of their gender and because of their sexuality. This has been termed the double-glazed glass ceiling. In some ways lesbians benefit from being in general less visible than gay men (for example there are much higher levels of violence against gay men, notwithstanding the notion of 'corrective rape' for lesbians) but in reality this benefit is really another manifestation of the invisibility of women in society and their under-representation in power structures. It is difficult to know if a lesbian woman is raped or violated because she is a woman or a lesbian unless it is overtly stated during the attack, proving either is difficult given the levels of misogyny tolerated by society and at work in the criminal justice system.

The importance of higher visibility for lesbians and women in public life cannot be overstated. Self-perception and how strongly patriarchal heterosexist views are expressed and acted upon in the home have a significant effect on both female children and children who are LGB. If they are strongly negative and/or oppressive, access to varied and positive role models of gay people and straight women outwith the home are necessary if LGB people and women are to transcend oppressive home environments and develop good self-esteem at a young age. Because female and LGB identity is constructed in opposition to the patriarchal, heteronormative identity of men, these identities can be understood to assimilate the systems of oppression

and discrimination, to a greater or lesser degree. Much argument from both women and LGB people is centred around expanding gender and sexual identities but it is true to say that their identity, as well as being a way that they define their difference from the male heterosexual other, is also the way that they are labelled and stereotyped and ultimately systematically repressed. By doing this they are stepping into the boxes and adopting the labels that they have been limited with and by which they are discriminated against. Understanding how to create female and LGB identities that transcends patriarchal heteronormativity would create a different much more positive language to discuss equality for both groups.

There is also a similarity in the ghettoised spaces that both women and LGB people have created in order to have a safe space to express themselves, or in the extreme example of women's refuges a safe place to be full stop. Although women and LGB communities are much more visible in the mainstream and in positions of power than was true even twenty years ago, legislation cannot guarantee that prevailing attitudes don't render this increased visibility obsolete because the difference in attitudes still effectively divides people. Working out how to make sure that gender and sexual orientation are not just 'add-ons' with their own special segregated places, policies and cultures is extremely important in the equalities work of both strands.

Sexual Orientation

