

Homophobia: a systemic problem

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By Carole Ruthchild SYDNEY — Explanations for the phenomenon of gay-bashing tend to focus on individual psychology; that bashers are motivated by a fear and hatred of gays, possibly because they themselves are afraid that they are homosexual and have to prove otherwise. While individuals are motivated by a variety of reasons, violence against gay men and lesbians is systemic. While not wishing to absolve those who commit assault and even murder from responsibility for their actions, in many ways the responsibility lies elsewhere. Homophobia, which is expressed in violence against lesbians and gay men, is an individual response to signals which exist throughout society, and are universally understood, that lesbians and gay men do not deserve the same respect as heterosexuals. The gangs of young men who deliberately stalk gay men in inner city areas, such as Darlinghurst, are acting out what the rest of the world does in other ways. For lesbians there is the additional issue of gender. Men of all ages are led to believe that women would do anything to be assured of a male escort. Men like to regard themselves as irresistible to all women. Lesbians are sexually autonomous women whose independence is perceived as a threat to male hegemony and control of women.

Gender roles

We live in a society which assigns men and women strict gender roles. Women are meant to be the nurturers who pander to men's needs and look after children, while men are the protectors and providers. Those who do not conform are punished, through legal sanctions, ostracism or physical punishment. Fear of violence helps to maintain this social control. Male homosexuality was a criminal offence throughout most of Australia until the 1980s. In Tasmania it remains illegal. Whether or not prosecutions actually occur is irrelevant; the law sets gay men apart in the public mind as criminals and deviants. In the past, anti-gay laws meant scandal and ruin for anyone exposed as a homosexual, and few were able to be open about their sexuality. Many men married to avoid detection, leading risky double lives. Many suffered internalised homophobia and sought psychiatric assistance in a desperate attempt to become "normal". While lesbianism was not illegal, the lack of employment opportunities for women made it very difficult to avoid marriage, and the stigma of remaining a spinster ensured that only the most determined retained their independence. The rise of women's and gay liberation in the 1970s paved the way for many changes. Lesbians and gay men became visible for the first time. However this was not welcomed by the establishment as the first Mardi Gras in 1978 where many people were arrested and had their names printed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, revealed. As lesbians and gay men became bolder and louder, the pressure for changes mounted. In NSW the Anti-Discrimination Act was amended in 1982 to include homosexuality; it became illegal to discriminate against lesbians and gays in employment, rented accommodation, public education, registered clubs and in the provision of goods and services. Male homosexuality was decriminalised in 1984, albeit with a higher age of consent than for heterosexuals.

There have been similar changes in most other states. But even in NSW, with arguably some of the most wide-ranging legislation in the world, discrimination continues. Lesbian and gay relationships have no standing; lovers who have lived together for 30 years have no automatic claim to each other's property if they die interstate. Lesbians and gay men are often considered unfit to be parents. Those with children from a previous marriage are expected to give up custody to the heterosexual partner. Lesbians in particular do not fit the traditional image of a good mother. Although no longer a requirement of the family court, the good mother ideal lingers on leading many lesbians to lie about their sexuality. Similarly, lesbians are denied access to donor insemination services at public hospitals, and though lesbians or gay men are not prevented from fostering or adopting children, we are expected to give way to heterosexual couples.

Anti-gay lobby

Changes have been strongly resisted by a small but vocal section of the community, such as Fred Nile and his wife. While the Niles' views may not be taken seriously by many, the fact that they sit in the NSW parliament, largely on an anti-gay platform, demonstrates a level of community support for their opinions. While the Niles' views are somewhat extreme, the mainstream churches differ only by degree. Religious organisations are exempt from complying with the NSW Anti-Discrimination Act; church bodies and schools can sack teachers for no other reason than that they are lesbian or gay. Most major religions concur in their condemnation of homosexuality. Religious doctrine provides a powerful underpinning for the widespread hostility to lesbians and gay men which thrives around the world. In the United States, anti-discrimination measures have provoked powerful opposition from the Christian right, who succeeded in revoking anti-discrimination legislation in Colorado, and have their sights set on similar measures in other states. In Oregon, the right narrowly failed to turn back the clock when it ran a campaign equating anti-discrimination legislation with special rights. Some would like this to happen here. In 1993, an amendment was proposed to the NSW Anti-Discrimination Act, outlawing homosexual vilification. During the ensuing debate, a US-made propaganda video, *The Gay Agenda*, containing lies and distortions based on interviews with psychiatrists and "ex-homosexuals", was sent to every member of the NSW parliament. Tim Fischer, leader of the federal National Party, is another vocal detractor of the lesbian and gay community. His statements that lesbian and gay relationships are not real families hurt deeply. The media adds to this climate of homophobia. An editorial in the August 26 Wagga *Daily Advertiser* declared: "I see the ABC has dropped its live Saturday telecasts of the Australian Rugby League finals. This is in keeping with the ABC's policy of failing to provide what the majority of white, heterosexual people in this country want. One wonders what dear old Aunty will show in place of the footy ... perhaps re-runs of that vile poofter parade in Sydney the ABC bends over backwards (pun intended) to show and promote each year." Such statements encourage hatred and legitimise violence. Despite the greatly increased visibility of lesbians and gay men in the mid 1990s, politicians, policy-makers, educators and human rights activists remain reluctant to utter the words "lesbian", "gay" or "homosexual", leaving homophobia unchallenged. At the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the Australian government made a strong statement in support of lesbian and gay rights, but was unable to pronounce the words. Instead, we were referred to as "people who are discriminated against on the grounds of their sexual preference". Bigotry and oppression need to be challenged

loudly and clearly. Naming brings respect and genuine acceptance. As "lesbians" and "gay men", we have humanity. As "people who are discriminated against", we are merely victims. As we approach the new millennium, we can allow indifference and political intransigence to stand in the way of equity and social justice, or we can endorse the concept of a genuinely pluralistic society and demand that our leaders do likewise, making it clear that bigotry will be held to account and that violence against lesbians and gays will no longer be tolerated.

[Carole Ruthchild is a representative of the Australian Council for Lesbian and Gay Rights, NSW. This article is an abridged version of a paper she presented to the First National Conference on Violence Against Gays and Lesbians in October.]

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