

LESBIAN TESTIMONY PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL ON CRIMES AGAINST
WOMEN IN BRUSSELS, WINTER '76

I am a member of Wages Due Lesbians, which is an organisation of lesbian women who are organising autonomously as lesbians in the Wages for Housework Campaign, in Britain, where I live, and also in Canada.

When I was first asked to give evidence as a lesbian I thought I could not, because what had hit me hardest and most particularly as a lesbian had not been the reaction of an employer or a man but of some of the women around me at work who had suspected me of being lesbian and had not wanted to sit with me or talk to me at all.

Then I realized that this is the most universal crime against lesbian women, the crime of being cut off from other women, often not regarded as a woman at all, often forced to hide ourselves, and lie continually about our lives, for fear of being sacked, thrown out of flats, or cut dead by the people around us. It always means an isolation of one kind or another. In places where no other lesbians are visible it is an isolation that is right next door to madness, and often delivers us into the hands of medical institutions. In other places it means a ghetto existence where we are "free" to tell a little of the truth - inside a very small circle, the ghetto of the bars or a ghetto inside the Women's Liberation Movement, where the struggle of lesbian women has been divided from the struggle of women relating to men. And I realised that the source of this crime is not women, but those in whose interests it is to keep women disciplined by heterosexuality.

First of all, that is men. Because when they know that we don't need them, and won't be around to wait on them, and particularly that we don't need them sexually and won't be available to serve their needs in that department, we know that they react with violence. And their reaction is responsible not only for a lot of broken bones but also very largely for the separation between us and other women. Not only are other women used as a threat against us, but we are used as a threat against other women. As soon as a woman starts stepping out of line she's told "watch it. We'll take you for a lesbian."

But although the attack is administered by men it doesn't end there. Because what heterosexuality means is work. The woman is supposed to function as a service station, feeding, clothing, cleaning, comforting, and calming the sexual needs of the present male workforce, and reproducing and caring for the future workforce. And everyone those workers work for needs women's heterosexuality and encourages heterosexuality and enforces heterosexuality. Because when they see us refusing to worry about men's needs they make it quite clear that we are not doing what women are supposed to do and we are not being what women are supposed to be. We are not doing our job as women.

This tribunal has done a great deal to bring out the ways that the state is attacking women. But we want also to make it very clear that the battle is not going all one way. And that the state's attack on us flows directly from our attack on the state, from our refusal to accept what they have made of our lives.

One thing we are refusing is the way our sexuality has been made into work. Relations with men always include an element of prostitution. It's not that they want it that way. But they have more money, and that means more power and because of that it is supposed to be our place in life to satisfy their needs. Not only our place but our nature - that's how we 'fulfill' ourselves.

But it is a nature that increasingly women are refusing, in all kinds of ways. Refusing to cook men's meals, pretending to be asleep when he comes home at night, fighting to make him give you women sexual satisfaction. And if we're lesbian we are not only breaking away as far as we can from dependence on men and from the domination of men, but claiming also our right to love each other with no holds barred. We are breaking through the discipline which says that we should work with

women, that we can talk with women, that very often we are closer to women and understand each other better than anyone else in the world, but we're not allowed to make love.

We pay a heavy price for making this battle. In fact, we face largely the same work and the same attacks that all women face, but they take particular forms.

First, we have no money. That is the general condition of women. In our case it is highlighted by the fact that very often we have no access to any man's wage. And we all know women's wages are hardly enough to survive on - if we can get them at all. Where we can't get them it is almost impossible to live as a lesbian. It is no accident that there are no Italian women on this panel today - it's very hard for a woman to get waged work in Italy so it's very hard to be lesbian. And it's not only Italy. I've heard from friends in Canada, where a very high proportion of women have waged jobs and where wages are relatively high, that some of them are being forced back into the closet, forced to give up the social and sexual life they want, because of the economic crisis.

Secondly, we have a lot of work. Our housework is somewhat different from the housework women do who are with men, but housework doesn't disappear. There's the physical housework - the cleaning and cooking - it's shared out better but we still have to do it, and we all know there's more of that work because of the crisis. And there's the emotional housework - which in some ways is less than it is with a man, but in some ways is more, because there's so much pressure all the time on all of us that we are continually having to struggle to hold each other together and keep sane. We're all mothers, all the time mothering each other and trying to keep a grip on ourselves.

And even our sexuality is still not in our own hands. First, because we have very little time for it. If we have time to keep one relationship afloat, we still can't usually manage more than one. We have all the tension of jealousy, or else all the tension of being the one person in a hostile world responsible for making someone's life alright. And then if you can deal with all that, there's the mundane problems of finding a place to be together, finding some privacy, worrying about the neighbours.

And then there is the question of children - which again is the question of money. Many of us can't afford to have children. We'd never have either the housing we'd need or the money for a babysitter to take them off our hands once in a while. I have always wanted to have a child, and, it is only gradually sinking in that I'll probably never be able to. I know there are a lot of women who do it, but it's no joke trying to bring up children, not without a man in the house, because men are not much in the house anyway, but without a man's wage in the house. And there are many millions of women - no one knows how many are lesbian - who are trapped in marriages because they can't support the children alone, even if the courts would grant them custody of the children. And in general courts won't grant a lesbian mother custody, and that is not only because she doesn't have the money but because women generally have no money so the courts, the police, the hospitals, the employers, the unions, husbands, even the man next door - they all think they can push women around and commit whatever crimes they like against us. And they can, because having so little money, we have little power.

Now as you know, lesbian women have been meeting every lunchtime during this tribunal. And we decided that on this panel, we wanted to talk not only about the crimes committed against us but also about our strategy against those crimes. We are always under attack, whether by prices going up, or physically. There was a conference of 600 lesbian women in England last weekend, and at the end of the disco, when there were very few women around, some men came in and attacked them, and one woman ended up in hospital. So we are always being forced to defend ourselves. But we don't want always to be on the defensive, and we have been looking

for a strategy to help us take the offensive, and move towards taking our lives into our own hands.

A number of lesbian women, in Britain and in Canada, are organising for wages for housework. We know we are entitled to it, and we know it is what we need, as lesbians.

Firstly, because it will change the material conditions of our lives, which are so much governed by how much time and money we have at our disposal; that means changing what relationships are possible too.

Secondly, because it will change everyone's conception of what is natural for women and therefore of what lesbianism is - none of our housework will seem natural once we're demanding wages for it.

But above all, because it will mean millions more lesbians. Millions who know they are lesbian will be able to come out, and millions who might want to be lesbian if the price were not so high in lack of money, in fear and in social isolation, will be able to consider it a real possibility for themselves. And that means also much more lesbianism among women generally, whether or not they sleep with each other.

There is no natural separation between lesbian women and other women. We know it's very hard to draw the line and say who is lesbian and who is not. We know that supposedly heterosexual women have lesbian fantasies, and that lesbian women have heterosexual fantasies. And we know that all women are fighting in some way against the discipline of heterosexuality, because we're all fighting men's domination over us. The more power we have, the more we can come out as lesbians. We're not saying that every woman should come out. But every woman should have the possibility of coming out. That is the only way of breaking the separation between lesbian and heterosexual women. And it's not something any woman can make happen on her own - it's not only a personal affair.

That takes us to the question of organisation. We are separated off from other women when we're forced to organise separately as lesbians, around "lesbian issues" which are supposed to be different from "women's issues". But we are equally separated off when we organise alongside other women around "women's issues" which are supposed to have nothing to do with lesbianism - so we're not supposed to mention that we are lesbian.

I want to say what the Wages for Housework Campaign has meant for us in practice. It has meant we have had the opportunity and the power to speak as lesbians in many situations where it would otherwise have been impossible. We have spoken on the television, we have spoken in the street, at street events with speeches and puppets and music. We've been able to tell other women about the fight that we are making as lesbians, to bring it out of the closet and make it public. We can do that because we can make the connection with the fight all women are making in one way or another against the same things we are fighting. Against housework. Against domination by men. For the money which will give us independence. For recognition that we women are entitled to satisfaction.

And we are not the only ones who make connections with other women. We have spoken in the street together with young women, with teachers, with office workers, with mothers, with women on welfare, some lesbian, some not, and these have been occasions for all these women to make their battles public and to make concrete connections with women fighting the same battle on other fronts. We have been isolated by our lives - shut in the house as full-time housewives, shut in the closet as lesbians. And we have often been isolated in our struggles, Even in the Women's Liberation Movement, we have had a struggle for nurseries here, a struggle for abortion there, and a struggle ~~xxxx~~ as lesbians way over there, and never a strategy for a

total attack on the condition that deprives us of child care, of the right to decide to have or not to have children, the right to lead sexual lives according to our needs and not the needs of production.

Here too at this tribunal many women have felt that we have faced only a list of crimes, depressing in its length and in its horror. It has been only a list because it was never put in the context of the housework that is so universal that it's part of our remale identitu, and the wagelessness that leaves us struggling to defend ourselves against men who beat us, employers who exploit us and sack us at will, doctors who cut out our wombs. But in how we felt about it, it has been more than a list, because as we listen to the ~~fx~~ different crimes, we all know, being women, that they are not just happening to someone else, that they could all potentially happen to us, because we are all fundamentally in the same position. The problem has been to locate what that foundation is so we can attack it.

I want to make one thing clear if I haven't already. Every crime that has come up at this tribunal is a lesbian issue. We should have heard a lesbian point of view on prisons, on doctors and hospitals, on welfare, on jobs, on the police, on men's violence against women, because we have plenty to say on those subjects that that is particular to our situation but very relevant to other women also. There are a lot of different particular situations, but women's work and the discipline, including the discipline of heterosexuality, that goes to make us do it - these are fundamental to all our situations. And our rebellion against that work and that discipline is just as fundamental and just as universal. We have to bring out all the ways we are undermining the lives we are supposed to live, and all the ways the state attempts to force us back into line, before any one of us will be able to live as she wants. Every one of our lives is a crime against women.

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