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Social Exclusion and the Stigmatization of Lesbians.

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Abstract

Within Human Rights as a whole there are included Sexual Rights. These refer, among other matters to sexual diversity, identity and freedom, and the principles of non-discrimination.

The fact that rights of this nature appear in such a context is proof enough that there is a need to protect individuals in certain situations where their human rights are violated. This is to avoid the exclusion that can be a consequence of belonging to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) group, and in particular, as discussed in this paper, to the category “lesbian”.

A society may have as its only form of division a binary separation (either a man or a woman) and standards indicating heterosexuality as the sole natural and normal behaviour. In this case, everything that fails to fit into this binary division and conform to heterosexuality will be labelled with terms such as “unnatural”, “abnormal”, “pathological”, “undesirable”, or the like. People are not aware that the fundamental aim is total and absolute social control in accordance with values that are created culturally and imposed generation after generation. It is also to punish anybody who tries to live outside the bounds that are set. It is from this attempt at control that stereotypes arise which can be used to assign false profiles and to stigmatize certain behaviours. These consequently lead to many varieties of exclusion.

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1. Introduction

Women’s lives implicitly involve a great deal of marginalization in most or all of the contexts in which living takes place. These include public and private spheres, work, social, academic and family life, health, leisure and free time. This marginality is shaped by the patriarchal and male chauvinist structures underlying society.

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It is these same structures that dictate the rules setting heterosexuality as the norm from which spring gender definitions and the two-fold division into men and women. It is on the basis of this division that roles and behaviours are attributed as suitable or to be expected. All of these, grounded on a binary divide, contrast what is termed “desirable and normal” with a whole list of behaviours, roles and ways of life that are pointed to as “abnormal”.

Apart from stigmatizing certain patterns as “abnormal”, such a society penalizes and punishes everything that escapes its control. This yields the two prime variables that throw light on the marginalization and social exclusion of lesbian women, as they are an outcome of these two characteristics: being women and being lesbian.

These two variables have as their result a double discrimination against such women in practically all spheres of life. This leads to a serious and proven risk of social exclusion and particular vulnerability when it comes to countering this risk.

Sexual rights fall within universal Human Rights, which have as their foundation the dignity, equality and freedom of all humans. Such rights should be promoted and defended by all societies and nations. It should be understood that they are, or should be, the full rights of all citizens. Any society that does not promote and guarantee them would thus be infringing rights and putting obstacles in the way of the full expression and realization of each individual. Here introduce the paper, and put a nomenclature if necessary, in a box with the same font size as the rest of the paper. The paragraphs continue from here and are only separated by headings, subheadings, images and formulae. The section headings are arranged by numbers, bold and 10 pt. Here follows further instructions for authors.

2. Social Exclusion

Social exclusion may be defined as the result of a dynamic process accumulating and combining various factors of disadvantage. These are linked to different aspects of individuals’ personal, social, cultural and political life.

Policies for social inclusion and cohesion take into account the fact that the social integration of an individual requires recognition and acceptance in a range of spheres. These include economic, work, social and community areas, but also those of citizenship and participation.

Sex is not just something natural, but rather is also a cultural and social phenomenon. Hence, it is susceptible to manipulation and control by the groups that are in power and by the predominant structures that are found in a given society.

Reducing sexuality merely to what is purely natural implies acceptance of the idea that it is static. In other words, it would be assumed not to vary from one culture or society to another and to have remained unchanging over the whole course of history, an assumption which is, of course, far from the truth. The terms which different societies have used to refer to sexual diversity are likewise not immutable, and even less so the positions that they have adopted towards this diversity.

If lesbianism is to be seen in all its complexity, it is practically unavoidable to take a historical and cultural perspective, with changing tones. This is because in this way alone it is possible to perceive and analyse lesbianism, marked as it is by a different development from male homosexuality and by its invisibility.

This invisibility comes directly from social exclusion, as it is made use of by those wishing to hide reality so as to seize the space of a group who will no longer be visible and thus will no longer either exist or have any rights. This space is the space that should belong to lesbians.

3. Heterosexuality as a Norm Used to Justify Control, Labelling and Punishment

Michel Foucault held that every model of power has its corresponding view of what is a healthy or an unhealthy body. It also has its own specific way of managing sexuality and reproduction.

The Western “labelling machine” has striven to create a complete hetero-centric binary structure, in which the only “natural” division is that between men and women. It has pointed the finger at everything falling outside this division as being “abnormal”, “unnatural” and “pathological”.

From this binary divide a whole series of roles and behaviours emerges, attributed to each gender group. These are seen as appropriate and correct according to the rules, as against all others, which fall outside what is normal or desirable.

Heterosexuality, from being just one more possibility among many, becomes a norm that must obligatorily be followed, an absolute and unique truth at the service of power structure. This is because they can now use sexuality as a further weapon for control and punishment in their armoury. They can even assign greater value and legal, financial and social benefits, the more closely the norm is obeyed.

There is evidence to show that what falls outside the norms is subjected to controls. One item of this is the fact that lesbians need to explain or justify their orientation, tastes and wishes more often than other women, whose relationships lie within the framework of heterosexuality as a norm.

All of this converts lesbianism into a marginal form of sexuality. It is despised, discredited, and seen as deviant, a vice, a sin or even proof of diabolic possession.

The above gives the context necessary for the representation of society that emerges from the assigning the status of being normal exclusively to heterosexuality, so as to generate stigmatization of the “abnormal”, despising and punishing people in this category. This is no more and no less than the fertile soil in which prejudice will grow exuberant and strong in two directions. One of these is to believe that all lesbians belong to the group of the abnormal. The other is to think that every single lesbian in the world must share all the characteristics that prejudice attributes to the group as a whole.

Just as sexuality is not a purely natural phenomenon, prejudices and phobia towards lesbians are not natural either. They are social and cultural constructs that to some extent arise from the assumed (but not real) superiority of heterosexuality as against all other options. It is even claimed by some that heterosexuality is so much better that conduct falling outside it puts in peril the survival of our species, with all that such an affirmation implies.

At the present day, the forms of prejudice aimed at lesbians are seen as spontaneous, appear not to be organized and are hard to explain. They seem to be practices running throughout the social fabric, and so difficult to pinpoint. They go unnoticed by most of those taking part in them, and do not emerge from specific speeches, formal structures or locatable institutions. They may be termed a “micro-phobia” against lesbians, and considered another adaptation of control machinery when dealing with a society which, on the face of it, wishes to respect the diversity of what is not the norm.

Apart from this phobia, lesbians also suffer from misogyny, and thus are doubly attacked, both as women and as lesbians. These twin assaults are far from being two unlinked phenomena: they must be seen as strongly connected. Proof of this is that the community of gay men does not face so much social rejection and is not as invisible as the lesbian community. Homosexual men are still men, even if they are gay, whilst lesbians face a two-fold prejudice and control.

4. Rendering Invisible as a Factor in Social Exclusion

Once a pattern of behaviour has been picked out as “abnormal” or “pathological”, the scene is perfectly set for social exclusion to show up in any shape or form. It may take the form of norms, or of refusing to support laws or legal initiatives to ensure equality of treatment and freedom from discrimination for lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and intersex individuals (LGTBQI). It may be through the presentation of such legal initiatives in a way that leaves them toothless and no more than a “lick and a promise”, through failing to sanction educational institutions in which there is discrimination, harassment or expulsion for pupils or staff on the grounds that they are lesbians, or through many other actions.

One of the most striking and clearest examples would be the refusal by the public health system to provide artificial reproduction treatment to lesbians. This is one of the most obvious and despicable measures for discrimination and control, as it is intended to impose a model for families that is heterosexual, put forward as the only model which is valid and which merits respect and rights.

Something similar may be observed within the programmes financed by the Health Ministry for groups that are at especial risk from sexually transmitted diseases, among which is the human papilloma virus. There is no specific provision for women who have sex with women, as may be noted from statements made by representatives of doctors’ associations, who have said that there is no special preparation for this, with in general no more than twenty-hour training courses on the generic prevention of AIDS.

This account could be continued with reference to real situations that are met with every day, such as gynaecological consultations in which it is taken for granted that all the women attending are universally heterosexual. Only a handful of specialists bother to enquire about this point so as to include such data in patients' medical records. The treatment that the mass media give to lesbians as a group or to individual lesbians when they are in the news for some reason is an approach based on the stereotypes created by first rendering such people invisible. There is also the "double life" that must be lived by lesbians who are resident in country areas. They have to behave within the norms when in a rural environment, and must leave it if they are ever to find enjoyment and be fully themselves, under the shield of anonymity.

However, there is one reality that runs through all these kinds of exclusion, having its origin in the invisibility of lesbians. This is the absence of real role models for women of lesbian inclinations, the lack of "flesh and blood" lesbians who can break with stereotypes and speak out, giving their opinions, stating their needs and telling their stories.

This position of being invisible makes it easy for their space to be seized from them. Generally, though, it is not stolen by other women, who may even try to come closer to their reality and learn about it. It is men who lay hands on this space, men who are self-proclaimed spokesmen, claiming acquaintance with a reality which in fact is totally and absolutely alien to them. As stated previously, lesbians are hit with a "double whammy" because of being both women and people who live outside the envelope of the normally accepted.

However modern and progressive some men think themselves to be, there is still one burden they find it difficult to carry. This is the fact that there are women who manage to lead a full life on all levels without the need for a man.

On this point it should be stressed that trans-feminist movements are currently raising the alarm about inaccurate interpretation and misuse of "queer" theories by some males, even in progressive circles. The act of affirming that lesbians are people does not change the privileged situation they have, nor does it, at least to some extent, oblige them to renounce or denounce their privileges, while they take over spaces constructed by women without so much as a "by your leave". This must be some sort of "new-age machismo" adapting itself to its surroundings in order to continue enjoying its position of privilege, without even a thought for the fact that they once again spaces and the right to speak are being usurped.

The fact that men use a structure of patriarchal power to lay down what women should be like, how they should behave, what spaces are for them, what their pastimes should be, and so forth, is already quite bizarre. However, if their aim is to teach lesbians how to be lesbians, it is not just bizarre; it is a total absence of common sense, of respect, and even of sanity.

Although this statement may seem harsh, it should not be forgotten that in the absence of real references it is patriarchal structures that create stereotypes of lesbians. Such structures lay out and design the way they should live, should dress, should take part in society, or be shown in the media, this being one more demonstration of the coercive power social structures have. These even lay down what and how they should think, or even how they should make love to other women, since pornographic images of lesbians are often a senseless and slavish copy of sex between men and women, or quite simply a parody intended to be erotic for men.

What underlies this affirmation is to a great extent the lack of power of lesbians as a group to show what they are really like in all their diversity. This is because they are hidden away, silenced, misinterpreted or misrepresented by a force that is used to shut off access to any higher profile and with it the possibility of making themselves known, of speaking for themselves without need for any new Messiah. However, what they need above all is to reclaim their own space, to take the reins of their group existence and to demand their rights as full citizens, and hence the end of social exclusion linked to their status as lesbians.

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