

This article is a product of a long-term authoress work in providing psychological assistance to women and girls of lesbian orientation, and working within educational programs in the field of diversity for numerous women and mixed nongovernmental organizations. Throughout March-June 2005 the authoress provided psychological assistance to women through acting as a co-facilitator in the support group for sexually diverse women. The article is published for Labris psychological web counseling and is a continuation of the three previous articles published in January, June and December 2004.

TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE LACK OF POSITIVE ROLE MODELS INFLUENCE LESBIANS' COMING OUT?

The June 2005 article deals with the current situation within and outside the lesbian community in the sense that it is still difficult to enumerate the names of lesbians that would make positive role models, i.e. examples, and that would be of key importance for those that are still living in fear and isolation produced by the homophobic surrounding. One might say that the sole notion of the positive role models within the context of establishing lesbian existence is disputable, but in this article it is emphasized that using the full name along with the surname publicly is by itself an act of setting a positive role model. At the same time the description of the complex context of obstacles is given, as well as some possible outcomes when role models are missing.

THE GENDER ROLES TRAINING

The obstacles prior to coming out are numerous within the patriarchal societies. Due to the differences in the socialization of women and men, the coming out process is somewhat different for each sex respectively. Lesbians are firstly socialized within the frame of female roles and their answer to coming out is differently shaped through this role training. "The female role" does not automatically mean that lesbians understand and support their female identity. It goes in the reverse direction as well – most often the majority female population bears their female identity with insufficient pride. The way the women identity is lived, according to the human rights concept of women nongovernmental organizations, is oftentimes described as "terror of feminism".

The gender role training imposes that the majority (heterosexual) surrounding accepts, to some extent, the fact one is "even" bisexual rather than lesbian. Is the bisexual orientation true or just a safe cloak in front of the homophobic surrounding where acceptance is more probable "as long as she has relationships with men" (the implication is "the thing with the girls is just a passing phase, that is – it is nothing serious")? Therefore it can be confusing both to the person herself and her surrounding, whether she is actually bisexual or is using a defense mechanism of denying naming herself as bisexual and fighting the resistance to accept her homosexuality. In this great confusion individuals' commentary "once I'm married and with children..." are not uncommon, and in front of yourself you see a person that is exclusive in choosing girls when coupling. As if it is necessary to close the circle in a traditional way, give a promise to oneself that "eventually everything will be all right" by convincing herself with "when I grow up, I'll be straight"... It is an issue of personal responsibility to gain full insight into one's own process.

In some cases, should the girl be bisexual, it can be easier for her to reveal her identity first as lesbian, since there are more organizations and resources within the community that assist affirming this identity. However, if within the setting of an existing lesbian community she tries to reveal her identity as bisexual, she risks isolation by the community, which can often react "biphobically" (the same way many heterosexuals are homophobic).

The gender role training is also recognized through the promotion of "butch-femme model", most often by the activists from the community. Despite the fact that it is now 2005 and that butch-femme roles were historically needed worldwide in gaining visibility and individualization, the continuous reaffirming of these roles speaks mostly of the degree activists whose voice can be heard within the community have achieved in moving away from the patriarchal context. (One letter that arrived in Labris web counseling contained, among other things, "I wonder now whether these butch lesbians are more appreciated?"). When one overcomes the gender role training in a traditional way, coming out – of course – is oftentimes postponed.

RESPONSIBILITY OF PRESENTING POSITIVE ROLE MODELS

The notion of «personal is political» is very important in any civil society and it has its difficulties in implementation within our country and in the lesbian rights context. To simplify, this notion responds to the question that lesbian sexual identity does not have to do with whom one sleeps with and it is not someone's personal thing (“which is meant to be kept for oneself and everything is ok while it is not disturbed”), but it is a human right, as well as other human rights are, to the wholeness of life with the respect and self respect within the equal citizenship state (it boils down to that You “shouldn't be disturbed” because you are lesbian”).

The first and foremost explanation of those that argue lesbian human rights why there are not more positive role models is continuous mentioning of the hostile surrounding “that simply does not accept” and represents a threat. This has, in time, become ordinary and it is just a matter of time of how much longer it can “be sustainable” and paralyze the process. The voice of women employed in the activist community would be, no doubt, dealing with the analysis of “positive role model” over and over again and by doing this it would (d)evaluate other members of the lesbian or activist community and also lesbians from the outside of the community and experience them or not as positive role models.

Sometimes it seems we are at a ball game where the ball of expectations and responsibilities for coming out goes from the official (names) of lesbian and gay organizations to those individuals that may not be involved in activism but are living a lesbian existence and manage it 24/7 in every available way. The individuals are within and outside lesbian community, the ball goes from them to the organizations and back. This notion is very difficult to live up to for both groups in practice. When coming out to one's parents and close family members the notion goes through a test and breaks. “Both groups” most often did not come out to their parents (regardless of the age).

The joint name apparently brings closer, but it essentially creates confusion to those that had not chosen activism. When one chooses to be part of a public, political organization working on any human right, the expectations of those one is addressing are that this individual is one step ahead. The notion of public work in itself contains “BEING OUT”. Otherwise the effect of official lesbian and gay organizations is limited to their names, not real persons behind it.

During her long-time work, the authoress notes that those women outside activism, who search for strongholds, state the need for women to identify with. The positive role models are necessary in any identity forming process, and the sexual one as well. The full names of women lesbians in public can be counted on one hand and this is an important shortcoming. Most often these are initials, nicknames, a personal name (without the surname), pseudonyms, etc.

Having in mind all the justification of real fears that apply to any gay individual in the country we live in, beside the persons working in lesbian and gay organizations that took over public functions with the responsibility to publicly and openly come out with their identity, the other persons working in the public eye are responsible as well and their success, for example, in different professions would provide motivation to the Others. *And the Others are all those that are the reason behind the existence of lesbian and gay organizations.* The Others live both in town and country, have or most often do not have the access to information about lesbian human rights through the computers or libraries available, or the Others are also members of some other vulnerable social group (disabled women, Roma women, etc) and they are in more ways than one affected by the lack of NAMES, SURNAMES AND FACES that could serve as role models. This is the reason why women need positive role models, not for criticizing different organizations per se but FOR SELF RESPECT.

SOME OF THE OUTCOMES WITH THE ROLE MODELS LACKING (AND THE SURROUNDING IS HOSTILE)

One possible response to the individual's lesbianism can be depression. Real outcomes could be the loss or the prediction of losing family and friends support. When it is difficult to find result-oriented mechanisms – depression may occur. Instead of projecting anger and rage on others, the feeling of guilt that arises from not being accepted is directed towards oneself. Self-respect is supported by our interacting with the individuals that are important to us. Should they “cancel” their love and support, there are no alternative sources of support and this is extremely frightening for a homosexual. These depressions can be serious, often unrecognized and unnamed – especially not directly connected to having anything to do with one's sexual orientation. Suicidal thoughts are common as well as suicidal and other self-destructive behavior. The need is to end this pain caused by the fact that one is a lesbian, while good things that are part of this identity are partially or completely left out and are completely left out of sight. Oftentimes, the successful depression handling is essential in the integration of identities (consult the article on forming identities within the Labris web counseling, June 2004.)

Women and girls of lesbian orientation are certainly not a homogenous group. Not all of them suffer from depression and not all of them deal with rage through self-destructiveness. The roots of self destructive patterns often lie in the prehistory of individual's family, different survived experiences, different social context where an individual is set, individual's profession, etc. Some foreign studies show that drug and alcohol abuse is present in high percentage (as well as with the majority) with lesbian and gay population. When we discuss psychoactive substances we think about those that are causing mood swings (both prescribed ones or not) including all types of alcohol. These are recognized through depressant categories, narcotic painkillers, stimulants and hallucinogens.

“Bar oriented” gay social settings support this high degree of drug and alcohol abuse. (Internalized) homophobia is also “fed” by the fact that the parties are organized “in secrecy”, these are not announced publicly as all other parties are, and they are scheduled only on certain days of the week (i.e. nights), in the premises that would be hardly chosen by the gay population as their own in any state that respects gay rights. The system of control by the hostile surrounding is clear: as long as gay individuals are not visible these occasional activities can be tolerated. Such treatment supports poor self-image with girls or women lesbians (“whatever I do is bad and wrong”, “I'm bad”). They follow offered possibilities as the only ones but they are becoming distant from the proud “bearing” of her lesbian identity.

It is not simple to talk about one's private life with friends, colleagues and family. There are numerous experiences of the attack or rejection occurring. Concurrently, a significant level of self esteem is needed, a conscious choice and an effort to make contact and find one's own space within the frame of supportive peer groups with similar sexual orientation or in realization of an emotional relationship. This requires taking risks by going to “gay places” or in some other way making one identified as a lesbian.

Many lesbians will be using drugs and/or alcohol on the first sexual encounter with the person of the same sex. More as a social construct, not really having a psychological justification, the effect of “relaxing and overcoming fears” is thus removed; but should this be practiced in the long run it carries the risk of girl's making sexual contacts with the person of the same sex (only) when intoxicated by alcohol or some popular drug (marijuana, ecstasy or something else). It is also possible to leave aside the necessary care of oneself and not have safe sex. In very short time the alcohol and drugs can lift up the feeling of self esteem, efficiency, feeling of personal success and power – all that is necessary in a homophobic and misogynist society that is constantly undermining one's self-respect. And again, in the long run, the regular usage would cause the “erosion of an individual Self”. Seeking help would become more difficult.

To conclude

It is very difficult to be true and consistent towards oneself and one's surrounding with lesbian sexual orientation

and lesbian sexual identity. It is almost four years since the unsuccessful Gay Pride meeting in Belgrade. In the meanwhile there has been no attempt to try and organize the same event and the authoress believes this is partially connected to the topic of this article. Certainly, the state is partly accountable for the condition of human rights but this is not all. It is the same this year, the International Pride Day is not scheduled and gay individuals deserve to carry their identity with pride.

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Serbian-English translation by [Ana Zorbic](#)