

comment

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**discussions, dialogues and interviews about
homophobia and heterosexual dominance**

This is the second issue of *Comment*, a new publication initiated to provide a forum for responses to topical social justice issues. *Comment* aims to be flexible, open to readers' suggestions and of practical value to health and welfare workers.

We plan to continue to produce it on an irregular basis, as need arises. Everyone is welcome to offer suggestions, topics, thoughts, plans etc., and to actively join in small groups to work together to produce it.

Many people contributed to this issue, through two formal discussion groups held in Adelaide at the beginning of 1995, through much informal discussion and also through contributing articles, discussions and interviews. In particular we would like to thank and acknowledge the work, inspirations and ideas of:

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- This issue was co-ordinated, edited, designed and produced by Suzy Stiles.
- The managing editor of *Comment* is Cheryl White.

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TAKE SOME ACTION!

**Want to do something
practical right now?
Here's a suggestion:**

- Make photocopies of the articles on pages 3-8 of this issue of *Comment*
- Pass them round to your co-workers or leave them in the staff room
- Table them for discussion in a staff meeting

Challenging heterosexual dominance - the first steps

by Suzy Stiles

The process which led to my involvement in this issue of *Comment* began for me in a suburban Adelaide living room more than a year ago. The room was full of members and friends of the Dulwich Centre's Community Mental Health Project, a predominantly heterosexual group. We were gathered to hear Laurence Carter, visiting Melbourne social worker and gay activist, lead a discussion about homophobia and heterosexual dominance.

It was the first time in my 16 consciously lesbian years that I'd ever known straight people gather to acknowledge and learn more about this problem, and the pain it causes - and, importantly, to recognise their responsibility.

I was in turns angry, grateful, proud, shocked that people were listening with respect and interest to my stories, afraid of exposing too much, relieved to be able to do so, and at times reduced to tears by such a tumultuous stew. With it came a heady exhilaration, a rush of energy released.

I have been 'out' for a long time, with friends, family, work - but still carry a continual watchfulness in public places, a weasel voice that mutters somewhere between ear and brain *Do they know? What will they think? Is this the right time to say it? Will they reject me? Will I still get that job? Can we hold hands? Is it safe here? Will they stare? Will they attack?*

Where heterosexuality is the norm, anything else is deemed blatant simply because it has become visible.



I know that many lesbians and gay men live with such inner police, to a greater or lesser extent. All of us hide at some point in our lives; it may be dropping your girlfriend's hand when six big blokes are swaying down the street towards you after closing time, or a careful evasion of pronouns in connection with your partner during a job interview.

Working out when to hide and when not to consumes a lot of energy. One thing that has stayed with me from that

evening more than a year ago is the memory of how good it feels when that energy is released.

Another thing that has stayed with me is an excitement that there are some heterosexuals out there who are beginning to understand that the oppression of lesbians and gay men is *their* problem. And they are even talking about doing something about it!

The excitement is for me accompanied by some caution. Until last year I had assumed that the gay and lesbian battle for the basic three R's - rights, respect and recognition - had fallen and would continue to fall squarely on our own shoulders. For some of us the question arises - do we really

want straights meddling in, and maybe taking over, *our* struggle? Will they prove trustworthy?

Whether heterosexuals can and should seek to unseat heterosexual dominance (and benefit from this themselves in many ways) is an idea that is explored from different angles throughout the following pages.

When I was approached by Cheryl White at the end of last year with the invitation to edit this issue of *Comment*, I jumped at it. In my mind the constraints of 24 pages became endlessly elastic. They have in fact expanded to 32, and yet so much that is vital has been excluded.



The key ideas that have emerged in this issue were canvassed in two discussion groups held in Adelaide in early 1995. The intention was to gain an overview of the issues that people who worked or had an interest in the health/welfare area regarded to be most important.

The groups focused on the damage done by homophobia and heterosexism, and on strategies to counter this damage. The 20-odd participants were mostly lesbians and gay men, plus smaller numbers of people who identified as heterosexual and bisexual.

Key issues

What follows is a summary of the issues that were more frequently or vehemently raised in these sessions. An overwhelming response was frustration at the lack of a forum in the health/welfare area to speak about these issues, and excitement that such a forum, albeit temporary, had been created. Many of the lesbian and gay workers who spoke to me in the course of

In a climate where disclosure may be met with rejection, ridicule, verbal and physical violence, job loss or other forms of discrimination, the choice to be open about one's sexuality is hardly a free one.

production of this issue had a similar response.

Many people in the groups leapt at the opportunity to talk together about the fundamental questions of when, why, how and where we choose to be 'out', and how these decisions affect us and our clients, as workers, and in our lives generally. These decisions are so often taken in isolation - and for those who remain 'in the closet', the isolation is even greater.

Opinions varied greatly on whether people can, or should, be open about their sexuality in different situations. It's clear however that heterosexual people could usefully understand something of the complexity of this question, and certainly should not expect a unified response from within the lesbian and gay community.

We also cannot always expect a unified response from lesbians and gay men, who may have very different experiences in life. The traditional hierarchy of gender applies here, as elsewhere in society, and it's worth remembering that so-called 'gay' issues often focus on male experience, and fail to include the interests or experiences of lesbians.

To be...

Many 'out' lesbians and gay men have been told we are being too blatant or 'ramming it down people's throats'. Where heterosexuality is the norm, anything else is deemed blatant simply because it has become visible.

Visibility is often also frowned upon in a workplace where management, co-workers or even gay and lesbian workers themselves fear that heterosexual service users may be alienated. This familiar argument both presumes homophobic attitudes as the norm, and prioritises those who hold them.

There are other less common-place consequences for the 'out' gay or lesbian. One health

worker talked of the difficulty of being treated as the 'gay resource' person in their workplace. Another spoke of coming out in a fairly progressive health agency only to be accused of 'hiding' their sexuality during their job interview.

Or not to be...

Many of those who took part in the discussion groups believed that concealing a fundamental part of one's identity has negative and often very painful effects on individuals, such as fear, isolation, self-hate - and can be particularly traumatic for young people.

In a climate where disclosure may be met with rejection, ridicule, verbal and physical violence, job loss or other forms of discrimination, the choice to be open about one's sexuality is hardly a free one.

Some of us have also experienced workplaces where we are supported (and even occasionally celebrated!) in our sexual diversity. The costs are therefore very different for individuals according to their environment, and their ability

to sustain beliefs that differ from the dominant view.

Some of those who took part in the discussion groups subscribed in varying degrees to the view that it is a matter of individual choice to be discreet about one's private life, and that sexuality is a private matter. Interestingly, a heterosexually dominant society requires this 'discretion' from homosexuals, but not from heterosexuals, who generally feel no hesitation in referring to the gender of their spouses or partners in a work context.

A group of gay and lesbian trainers working in the sexual health area reported a strategy developed in their workplace to deal with this manifestation of heterosexism. They found that they all had been consciously ambiguous about their sexuality in training situations, whilst their heterosexual colleagues were not, and had not even considered the issue.

Eventually this workplace accepted a protocol whereby none of the trainers revealed their sexuality whilst training. It proved to be a great way to



learn about heterosexual dominance. Through being faced with this, for them, unusual limitation, the heterosexual trainers also had a taste of the restrictions which are a daily dose for lesbians and gay men.

1.7 million Australians

Many people expressed their concern about 'the cost for the 10%' when our sexual orientation is hidden (it is generally accepted that about 10% of people in Western societies are non-heterosexually identified - that means we're talking about 1.7 million Australians!). The more lesbians, gay men and bisexuals remain in the closet, the fewer role models exist, the less normalising of diverse sexualities occurs and the more isolated and vulnerable to stigma those few who are visible remain.

Youth workers in particular find themselves struggling with the choice of being out, and risking the onslaught of the gay (or lesbian) paedophile myth, or hiding their sexuality, in the knowledge that this denies a positive role model to those young people who are questioning their sexuality.

The myths

Participants in the discussion groups also had a lot to say about the damage caused by the many prevailing homophobic myths and stereotypes. There are still so many people who believe that lesbians and gay men are sick, sinful or plain disgusting. The 'sickness' theory underpins the widely held fear that it's 'catching', and that children are particularly vulnerable - a belief that adds an extra ugly dimension to the

To actually notice, and then talk, about how homophobia and heterosexual dominance affect our lives is a great interruption to the power relationships that have been founded in silence, denial and fear.

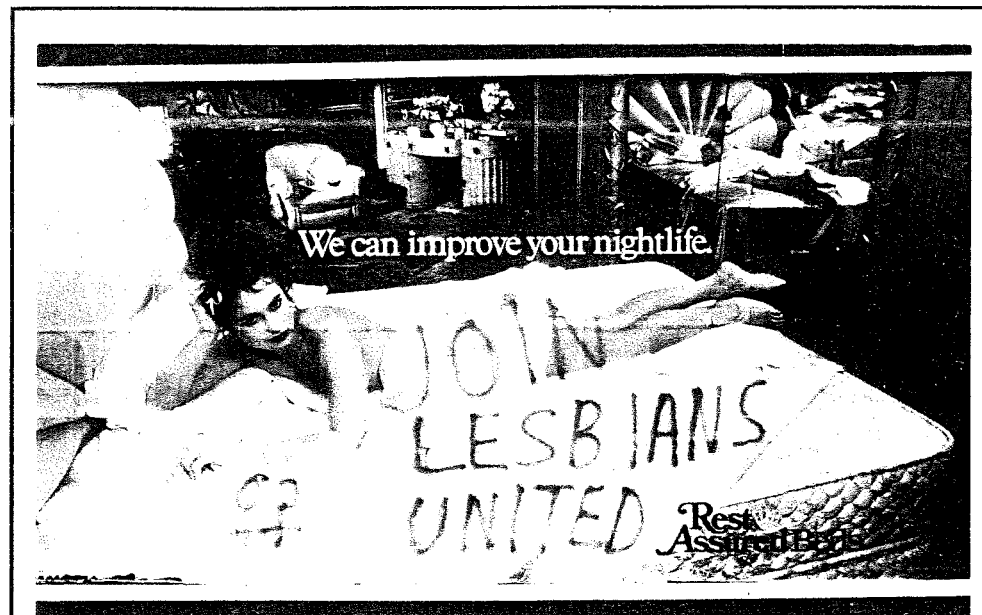


photo: Jill Posener

Adverts which portray exclusively heterosexual imagery or assume heterosexual audiences are examples of the subtle and often unnoticed heterosexism that saturates our daily lives.

The billboard above is an example of a typically heterosexist ad. Who could doubt that Rest Assured Beds were appealing to a male gaze? In this case some 'affirmative action' graffiti has 're-faced' the ad to create an altogether different message!

myth that homosexuality is a predatory condition.

Many institutions continue to treat gay men and lesbians in the context of 'sickness', even those which pursue a more liberal rhetoric. For most welfare, education and other public service institutions this rhetoric acknowledges discrimination against groups such as women and girls, Aboriginal people and people from non-English speaking backgrounds, but not discrimination based on sexuality.

Policy is certainly not the be-all and end-all in organisational change, but it makes a huge difference if the policy is there to support us.

In workplaces where it's too dangerous for an individual to raise homophobia issues per se, a good back-door strategy is to introduce them as part of a broader social justice policy and training package. In this way the individual is less likely to become the target of homophobic attacks.

Making change

The first step is breathtakingly simple. Pay attention. To actually notice, and then talk about, how homophobia and heterosexual dominance affect our lives is a great interruption to the power relationships that have been founded in silence, denial and fear. There are many more steps to be taken in the long journey of institutional and social change, but this first one is crucial.

Many of the lesbians and gay men who participated in the discussion groups were tired of taking the heat. They felt that it was often riskier for us to raise the issues of homophobia and heterosexual dominance, and were emphatic about the necessity for heterosexuals to initiate and promote these discussions.

The first step may be simple, but that doesn't mean it's easy to take. I hope that this issue of *Comment* will encourage those heterosexuals (and indeed lesbians, gay men and bisexuals) who haven't thought much about these issues to do some thinking and talking, and that those who have already done some will do some more.

I also hope that many heterosexual people arrive at the conclusion that it is time that they took the initiative. Most of all, I hope that the thinking and talking leads to some visible changes and challenges to heterosexual dominance in our workplaces and our lives.

Suzy Stiles



SPEAKING OUT from the dominant position

by Chris McLean

Until quite recently, I have always thought of myself as heterosexual, without questioning what that really meant. I acknowledged that I belonged to a dominant and oppressive masculine culture, and spent time thinking about issues of gender and race. I recognised that my position of privilege brought with it ethical dilemmas. How could I work to dismantle an unjust system, from which I simultaneously benefited? How could I know whether my efforts to produce change were not simply reproducing dominant culture in ways that were invisible to me? However, I had certainly never thought of myself as heterosexually dominant!

In grappling with this question I have been lucky enough to be included in invitations from some lesbian women and gay men to look at my participation in the dominant culture of heterosexism. I have found it relatively easy to see heterosexual dominance at work in the society at large, and to see it in the actions and attitudes of people around me. I have, however, found it quite difficult to see in myself.

I know that I am not alone in this. For some reason, many people from the dominant culture who are genuinely engaged in challenging injustice in many areas of life

are strangely ignorant of, and silent about, the oppression experienced by their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

This article is intended to explore why this is so, and to ask what responsibilities members of the dominant heterosexual culture have to challenge this situation. In order to be able to write it, I have talked with and interviewed a number of straight men and women working in a variety of ways within the 'helping professions'. They have all been engaged, for some time, in exploring issues of heterosexual dominance with gay and lesbian colleagues.

The first thing to be clear about is that there is a problem! Lesbians and gay men are telling us this very clearly but most straight people simply don't want to know about it. The 'problem' ranges from the obvious example of homophobic violence, to the more insidious expressions such as the total absence of positive gay and lesbian images in our public media. This is not the place to go into any detail of what gay men and lesbians experience on a daily basis. It is enough to say that this injustice exists, it is not minor, and that if we have an ethical commitment to social change, we cannot go on ignoring it. Ignorance is not an excuse, it is part of the problem!

The very invisibility of the issue needs careful examination. Gay and lesbian colleagues, friends and acquaintances who feel safe enough to relate their pain to us or challenge us will probably be from the same class and racial background, and often of the same gender. They may have

professional qualifications, good incomes and seem 'just like us'. How can they regard themselves as oppressed? How can they justify time being spent on their concerns when we are already working so hard with people who are obviously in crisis?

We need to remember that the invisibility of oppression does not mean that it does not exist. Gay men and lesbians have put enormous amounts of effort into remaining invisible as a matter of survival. To use this invisibility to justify non-action is cruelly unjust. Gays and lesbians also take on an almost overwhelming responsibility for anticipating possible outcomes of any interaction with straight people, dealing with their responses, both good and bad, and following through the ongoing consequences of these interactions.

In any situation where a dominant and a marginalised culture meet, it is useful to remind ourselves that the best judges of whether an injustice has occurred are people in a marginalised position. Our very membership of the dominant group means that we will be unable to see many of the injustices which are so glaringly obvious to those who are affected by them every day of their lives.

It seems to me that the first responsibility we have is to educate ourselves about the realities of the world we live in. There is a vibrant gay and lesbian literature of which most straight people (including me) know little. In my own academic area of gender and history, many of the major works are written by gay and lesbian scholars. They are also developing many of the most exciting new theoretical understandings of sexuality, ethics, and popular culture. However, I must admit that my knowledge of these writings barely scratches the surface. This can only have come from some sense that the 'gay experience' is 'other' and marginal to the 'real business' of academic understanding.

Similarly, we need to be wary of simplistic generalisations. In a society which prioritises male experience, talking about 'gay issues' tends to hide the fact that lesbian experience is different from that of gay men. Even talking about 'gay and lesbian issues' without acknowledging those differences can reinforce the invisibility so often experienced by lesbians. Heterosexual people should not assume that if they deal with gay men's issues they will automatically understand lesbian issues as well.

At this point, I would like to highly recommend the community library run by the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service and the AIDS Council of South Australia. It is open to any interested person, and membership is free. It has the largest non-medical collection of publications on HIV/AIDS in Australia, and also has an extensive collection of local, interstate and overseas gay and lesbian books, magazines and newspapers. (Ring 362 3106 and ask to speak to the Stephen the librarian to find out more!)

There is a whole world out there in which gay men and lesbians are grappling with the suffering and injustices of HIV/AIDS, with no recognition from dominant culture. Three times as many men have died from AIDS as died in the Vietnam War - but where are the mass movements, marches and demands for action that emerged from the whole community in response to that situation? It has been said that a form of genocide is taking place in our very midst, and we go on as if nothing were happening.

There is a great need for us all to recognise and celebrate the achievements of the gay and lesbian communities. For example, we need to publicly acknowledge their contribution to dealing with HIV/AIDS. The Australian government basks in the international recognition of its leading place in HIV/AIDS prevention policies, but fails to mention that without the concerted

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action of gays and lesbians these policies would never have been introduced.

Similarly, public events such as the Mardi Gras are important antidotes to the privatising of gay and lesbian issues and lives. As the Mardi Gras becomes more and more popular and accepted we should not forget that it initially faced fierce police repression and overwhelming public hostility.

In contrast to the non-action and indifference of most straight people to issues of homophobia, many gay and lesbian social workers, teachers, therapists (etc, etc) are making major contributions to the lives of straight people, while having to hide the source of much of their energy and commitment.

As well as educating ourselves about what is happening 'out there', we need to look at ourselves and recognise how the invisibility of heterosexual dominance is maintained in our own lives. It came as quite a shock to me recently to realise that I had constructed a major work of exclusion within my own friendships. I pride myself on my close male friendships. I talk to my men friends about anything and everything - or so I thought. We talk about relationships and share hopes and excitements as well as griefs and fears. Yet never once had the question of same-sex attraction been raised.

When I finally mentioned this to a long-time friend, he told me that he has had as many relationships with men as with women. I thought I knew him well, yet I never knew about an important part of who he is. I am now faced with renegotiating the boundaries of unquestioned relationships. What is it OK to say? What is it OK to ask? How many of my taken-for-granted knowledges are based on ignorance and silence?

To me this is symbolic of our whole society. Injustice is maintained, not so much by evil exploiters, but by the mass

of 'good' people who have the privilege of being able to close their eyes and ears to the injustices all around them, because these injustices do not impact directly on them. This silence is then perpetuated by a system that discourages anyone from raising these issues.

On the other hand, gays and lesbians are continuously hyper-aware of our responses to any mention of these issues. Something we say might, to us, be simply flippant, but, to our gay and lesbian acquaintances or friends, it is a sign of how much we are to be trusted.

Once we start to become aware of this and make efforts to find out more, we are faced with another dilemma. How can we take responsibility for challenging heterosexual dominance when we encounter it in our workplaces, in our families, and amongst our friends and acquaintances? This can be a very difficult process, confronting us with a range of dilemmas.

There is often a concern that gays and lesbians may not want straight people to speak up on these issues, particularly if it seems that straight people are trying to speak on their behalf. I have sometimes worried that it might be seen as presumptuous to speak out at all, and somehow to be denying the capacity of people from the marginalised position to speak for themselves. However, in all the conversations I have had with lesbians and gay men who are interested in the possibility of partnership with heterosexuals, there has been a very clear message to us.

Gay men and lesbians definitely want straight people to challenge the homophobia of straight culture - however, the question of motivation is very important. We need to be clear why we, as heterosexual people, are involving ourselves in this area. If we are doing so simply to help others, we are effectively distancing ourselves from the issue and reinforcing our dominant position.

We need to be clear why we, as heterosexual people, are involving ourselves in this area. If we are doing so simply to 'help others', we are effectively distancing ourselves from the issue and reinforcing our dominant position.

We need to find ways of speaking that make it clear that we are speaking for ourselves. For myself, I have increasingly realised how much my experience of my body, my sexuality and my friendships with men and women are limited by the prescriptions of heterosexual culture. I have a longing for a deeper sense of connection and community, as well as a greater sense of freedom in my experience of myself. I am increasingly convinced that this is impossible without challenging the dominant culture of heterosexuality.

A number of people I spoke to talked about their desire to raise issues of heterosexual dominance in a tactful way. They did not want to look as if they were claiming the moral high ground and preaching to people they considered ignorant or misguided. There was a recognition of how important it is to find ways of speaking personally about issues, so that the speaker is not polarising a situation into 'goodies' and 'baddies', but acknowledging their own place within dominant culture. We need to find ways of accepting responsibility without being paralysed by a sense of blame. There are often very few opportunities for people to learn about these issues, and if we have had such opportunities, it is itself the result of privilege, and does not place us outside of our own culture.

Confronting people with their 'mistakes' in an aggressive way is extremely unlikely to be effective. I am talking here about action taken by members of the dominant culture - members of marginalised groups certainly have no responsibility for raising issues tactfully.

However, my experience, and that of the people I interviewed, has been that we have been treated with kindness and consideration by gay and lesbian colleagues when we have caused them pain through our own unconscious heterosexism. If we have been treated so thoughtfully ourselves, it would be profoundly dishonouring to treat others of our own group any differently. On a number of occasions it has been made quite clear to us that what gay men and lesbians really want is for us to 'hang in' with our straight colleagues, friends and acquaintances - not to write them off or give up on them because it seems too difficult to reach a shared understanding.

One woman I interviewed said how helpful she found it to 'carry community around in [her] head and heart'. What she meant by this was that, if she tries to speak on issues of heterosexual dominance simply as an isolated individual, it often seems just too difficult. However, having made the effort to develop a network of like-minded people with whom she is exploring these issues, she can imagine them there with her when she needs to take action, and feels much more able to act.

In another interview, a woman spoke about her dilemmas of not knowing whether to speak up in public situations. She dealt with this by personally approaching lesbian women she knew afterwards and speaking of her dilemma. She has found this to be a powerful way of gaining a greater understanding of the issues, and a way of gaining greater confidence in her own judgement.

This speaks clearly of the need for straight people to develop links with gay men and lesbians. Without this it is impossible to know whether our well-intentioned efforts are simply reproducing dominant culture in ways that are invisible to us.

Similarly, a man spoke of confronting his fear of being labelled homosexual if he spoke out on these issues. He recognised that this was itself a product of his own homophobia. However, this is a very powerful part of dominant male culture, and it can be very difficult to deal with, particu-

larly in isolation. This man has found that developing relationships with gay men and lesbians, as well as developing a community of straight people who regard these issues as important, is the only way of ensuring that he does not end up silenced or giving up.

As far as the workplace is concerned, this article is not intended to be a 'how-to' guide to practical measures one could take to make one's services appropriate to gay and lesbian clients, or how to create a safer and more inclusive environment for gay and lesbian co-workers.

There are, however, lots of practical things to be done. These include looking at the images which adorn our waiting room walls, and the magazines on the waiting room tables. How many images of gay men and lesbians do we see? How comfortable would gay men and lesbians feel in such an environment?

What about the wording of our forms and our interview questions? Do they assume heterosexual partners, for example? Do they speak of married and de facto relationships, or of partnerships and relationships? What about the

conversations in the staff room at lunch time? Would gay or lesbian colleagues feel safe to talk about what they had done with their partners on the weekend? Would they feel safe to talk about a friend or partner dying of AIDS?

These are some of the questions we all need to be looking at. No article can answer them. The only answer is to find ways of entering into equitable partnerships with gay men and lesbians, to listen and then to take action. The opportunities are there if only we are willing to take them up.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

by Suzy Stiles

Homophobia, heterosexism and heterosexual dominance - what's the difference? Does it matter anyway? Navigating the sometimes stormy and always changing sea of language is not easy. But for those of us who are impatient for change, the journey can be both a creative and a necessary adventure.

Over the last 20 years, feminists, anti-racists and others have restated an old truth - language is power. The terminology of the powerful routinely demeans the powerless (women are 'girls', men of colour are 'boys'). Women, people of colour and others accustomed to the sharp end of belittling or abusive language have therefore argued for words which reflect the choice of people to describe themselves.

These new ways of thinking about language have of course been pilloried by those who love to condemn what they call 'political correctness'. It provides endless creative fun for the ostrich defenders of the status quo, who miss the point with their 'politically correct' parodies ('Snow Unpigmented and the Seven Differently

Sized Male Persons' is the most recent jibe I've seen).

Less fun for writers and editors in the media circus is the concept of 'political awareness', a life-affirming faculty which employs heart and mind and spirit. It is this, not political correctness, which can understand and discriminate between offensive, appropriate, respectful and silly language.

All the world's queer...

The debates around language are alive and well in queer politics, as elsewhere. In 1990s North America, the word *queer* has been reclaimed and is the new bon mot for the urban, young, activist and academic.

This practice of reclamation is not new. When I was younger it felt daring and politically fashionable to call ourselves *dykes*. *Faggot*, a term of abuse originating when gay men were used like faggots to fuel the flames which burnt witches in medieval Europe, is now claimed with pride by gay men. We can also deduce from the definitions of 'witchlike' behaviour which were used at the time that the 'witches' themselves were probably often lesbians.

Queer as a term has the advantage of being inclusive of all non-dominant sexualities, and avoids the cumbersome-

ness of having to repeatedly list 'lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transsexuals'.

It avoids the fraught term *gay*, which some would argue has reached its use-by date. (Does *gay* include women? A murky question which has seen many groups over the last five to ten years change their names to include the words *Lesbian and Gay*). It also avoids problematic categorisation, and is therefore preferred by those who argue that sexuality should be understood as a spectrum, not a finite category.

However in Australia, *queer* is not widely recognised beyond inner city politics and the world of urban chic. We have therefore not used the term much in this issue of *Comment*, as currently many people in the lesbian and gay communities would not identify as queer.

The love that dares to speak its name

The importance of creating a language that describes our diverse non-heterosexual identities should not be underestimated. The oppression of gay men and lesbians in the West has been unique in the level of silence that surrounded us. It's not just that the words were not of our own choosing - they hardly existed, and certainly weren't allowed

to be spoken. For lesbians in particular, this linguistic absence encouraged those who, like Queen Victoria, denied our very existence.

This is why visibility is so crucial an act for lesbians and gay men - and why we have to 'go on about it'. To adapt an old feminist adage: *The power of heterosexual dominance is the silence of the queer*.

Finding the language to describe oppression is an act of power as important as finding words to describe our own sense of self. The use of the term patriarchy, for example, shifted the whole territory on which 'the Women's Question' was debated.

Homophobia

The term *homophobia* has been used for the last 30 years to cover all manner of hatred, discrimination and bigotry towards gay men and lesbians. It has been a useful tool in the attempts of lesbian and gay activists to move the locus of evil from the object of hatred to the perpetrator of hate. The term articulates the belief that prejudice, not homosexuality, is the problem.

However, like the word *homosexual*, it is arguably problematic. For most people the image conjured up by both words is that of gay men.

In fact, the root of both is *homos*, Greek for equal or same, not *homo*, Latin for man - but this unfortunately doesn't change popular perception, and the inherent exclusion of lesbians.

For others, *phobia* seems inappropriate, more reminiscent of the fear of spiders than of the hatred and contempt that causes virulent verbal attacks or gay bashing.

Another difficulty is that *homophobia* sounds like *homosexuality*. It therefore doesn't do much to point the finger towards dominant heterosexuality as the source of the problem, or towards those who benefit from and have the upper hand in perpetuating heterosexuality as naturally superior.

In addition, *homophobia* is often used in a context which suggests that the problem belongs to a particular especially bigoted individual, or group of individuals such as National Action. Unlike the concept of *heterosexual dominance*, it does not encourage a vision of the whole system which perpetuates heterosexuality as the naturally 'right' and desirable mode.

Heterosexism or heterosexual dominance?

The concept of heterosexism has its roots in feminist thought, and in particular we

owe much to that powerful poet and radical thinker, Audre Lorde. In *Sister Outsider* she articulates the problem as a *belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving over all others, and thereby its right to dominance*.

More recently, Joseph Neilsen provided the following useful analysis:

Heterosexism is the continual promotion by major social institutions of heterosexuality and the simultaneous subordination of all other lifestyles (that is, gay, lesbian and bisexual). It is based on unfounded prejudice, just as racism and sexism are. When our institutions knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate these prejudices and intentionally or unintentionally act on them, heterosexism is at work.

Heterosexism is not limited to institutional oppression. Individual acts of heterosexism occur when individuals discriminate and institutions passively allow or foster the continuation of such discrimination. Heterosexism manifests itself in blatant discrimination against gays and lesbians, as well as in more subtle forms of exclusion or lack of recognition.

Heterosexism is alive when individuals refuse to rent to gays or lesbians, when the military discharges someone

a belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving over all others, and thereby its right to dominance.

- Audre Lorde, African American lesbian poet

for homosexual behaviour or the mere suspicion of being homosexual, and when governments prohibit gays and lesbians from marrying legally.

*Heterosexism also works in more subtle ways, as when television programs and advertisements show only heterosexual couples, when mainstream media under report gay and lesbian events.... and when obituaries fail to acknowledge the life partners of gay men and lesbians.**

We may see ourselves as tolerant, kind and opposed to all forms of discrimination, and still find ourselves being subtly or perhaps even blatantly heterosexist. Lesbians and gay men aren't magically exempt either, although it's harder for us not to notice when we're the ones being excluded.

If you sit and think for a bit, it won't be hard to remember a time when you've done a bit of inadvertent exclusion or made an assumption. Have you ever assumed a colleague's partner is the opposite sex? Asked whether your friend's daughter has a boyfriend yet? The list goes on and on.

Finally we come to *heterosexual dominance*. Many prefer this term to *heterosexism*, which is actually a misnomer for something that would more accurately be called *sexual orientationism*, that is, assigning a superior value to a single sexual orientation (wait til the PC bashers get a hold of that one!).

Heterosexual dominance, although an unwieldy mouthful unlikely to catch on in the school playground, has the advantage of pinpointing the process whereby heterosexual-ity is not only assigned

superior value, but dominates and is actively asserted over all others. It refers to a system in which inequities of power are produced and maintained, and helps create an understanding that it is this systematised inequity that has to be challenged if we are to create any real change. It's not just about being nice to gay men and lesbians, though the rhetoric of this, the International Year for Tolerance, might lead you to think so.

If you're left wondering which terms to use, I'd suggest all three. I do. Yes, *homophobia* has a shelf life, but it's a term that's much more readily understood than *heterosexism* or *heterosexual dominance* (which has been confused with the top position in heterosexual SM sex!).

Homophobia also for me comes closer to expressing the virulent contempt, violence or personal attacks I have experienced in my life. *Heterosexual dominance* is somehow too conceptual a term to catch the essence of being spat at in the face, or having fires lit on your doorstep, or reading graffiti down your street that says 'Get out you AIDS fuckers - gay men and lesbians are killing our kids!'

Having said that, the terms *heterosexism* and *heterosexual dominance* will be crucial in attacking the power systems which fuel this sort of homophobia. Without implicating all the structures of heterosexuality we cannot create lasting political and social change. So until someone comes up with something catchier than *heterosexual dominance*, I'm practising getting my tongue round it!

* Joseph Neilsen, The Power of the Language We Use, *Out/Look*, Fall 1990.



Are we living in a 'Gay' New World?

by Barbara Baird

Towards the end of last year it struck me that there has been a significant shift in the meaning of 'gay' in Australian public political discourse. 'Gay' has become a legitimate category in Australian debate, and 'gay' issues have come to be discussed regularly if not frequently in the media.

A gay activist I know has given up his scrapbook of gay news items, because he can no longer keep up. 'Gay' people have seemingly arrived as citizens with rights and a place in Australian society.

Some key steps can be identified which illustrate this change on the national cultural and political scene. First is the ongoing campaign being waged by the Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights Group (TGLRG) to have male homosexual acts decriminalised in Tasmania. The brilliance of their move to take their grievance to the United Nations, and to invoke the discourse of human rights, cannot be overstated.

There have also been the debates provoked by the International Year of the Family. Right from the start, IYF was marked by challenges to traditional definitions of the family from lesbian and gay groups and spokespeople, and by reinstatements of 'traditional family values' from conservative sectors of the community.

At the end of the year, the Chief Justice of the Family Court, Justice Alastair Nicholson, made a clear call for change in the area of family policy, calling for a more tolerant approach to homosexual couples with regard to the care of children.

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras made its contribu-

tion to the debate by choosing as its 1994 theme *We Are Family*. Their contribution was highlighted by the ABC's pioneering hour-long telecast of highlights of the Mardi Gras Parade on the Sunday night following the big event, a broadcast which has been repeated this year.

Gay and lesbian characters and themes were not limited to the TV coverage of Mardi Gras. Regular programs and one-offs, documentaries and drama, with lesbian or gay characters were featured on both the ABC and the commercials. (SBS has been doing it for years.) This explosion of popular culture representations of lesbian and gay characters wasn't just limited to TV.

1994 was quite a year for gay characters on the big screen too, with *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *The Sum of Us* rating among the year's best home-grown film product. The rash of articles in glossy, mostly women's magazines on *lesbian chic* in the early '90s form a background to this new cultural legitimacy of the gay citizen.

If 1994 marked a significant shift in the place of 'gay' at the level of public discourse, what does this mean for the material conditions of life for real lesbians and gay men, our friends and families?

It is instructive to consider one of the significant political/legal victories for gay and lesbian activism in 1994. Largely because of hard political work by community activists, the Industrial Relations Commission's decision on family leave defined the people a worker has caring responsibility for in a way which allowed recognition of the connectedness and responsibilities of gay men and lesbians to our partners and partners' children.

The Australian Council for Lesbian and Gay Rights (ACLGR) claim the IRC's decision as a triumph, but this symbolic victory was in the context of the broader failure of the trade union movement's

bid to have carer's leave established as a basic condition for all Australian workers. So - a gay victory, but a workers' defeat.

As feminist academic Carol Johnson has said *We are currently living in a period in which citizenship is being constructed in increasingly narrow, economic terms - in which Keating's idea of an inclusive social policy is to argue that women, gays, and people from Non-English speaking backgrounds can also play a role in the economic rationalist project of reconstructing Australian capitalism.*

'Acceptance' - a mixed blessing

In 1994 the community-based campaigns of lesbian and gay groups continued to meet with mixed success. Only the NSW government supports the lesbian and gay communities in their struggle against anti-lesbian and anti-gay violence, an issue at the top of the agenda for many groups.

Issues concerning the lack of validity granted to lesbian and gay partnerships continue to disadvantage us with regard to superannuation, partners who die intestate, insurance coverage and a host of other quite material arenas.

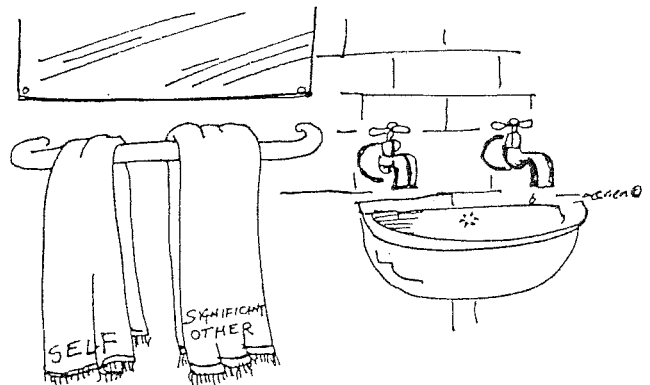
Having said all that, I feel that we have no choice but to welcome the shift in political discourse that accords long

overdue legitimacy to 'gay' issues. That politicians now have to have a public opinion about issues like the televising of Mardi Gras for example, is a positive thing. Even if their views have not changed, the political frameworks around them have, and new questions are on the agenda.

However, 'acceptance' of our place on the mainstream agenda brings with it the risk of having our issues framed in terms not our own. A 'debate' staged in The Australian newspaper highlighted this for me (25 January 1995). The debate was enacted via a pair of opinion pieces which claimed to discuss the 'gay agenda' claim for 'gay marriage'.

To my knowledge, the demand for gay marriage is not actively on the agenda of any lesbian or gay community group in Australia. The only group which has conducted any thorough process of community consultation on the issue, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, presented a document to the NSW Parliament arguing that gay and lesbian relationships should be given the same status as *de facto* heterosexual relationships.

On the one hand ex Federal Minister Barry Cohen was definitely opposed to allowing gay marriage. On the other, *Adelaide Review* editor Christopher Pearson argued



that *marriage is the intrinsically heterosexual enterprise* which is central to *the survival of the race* but rather *reluctantly* accepted that *permanent same sex unions deserve some measure of legal recognition*. This was a debate where both commentators agreed, leaving the status of marriage itself as *the foundations on which our society was built* unchallenged.

Both writers ignored the years of feminist critique of the *institution* of marriage which has claimed that marriage is the foundation of our society because it enshrines male property rights over women. Let's not forget that only in 1984 did rape in marriage become a crime in South Australia.

While many gay men and lesbians are looking for, and creating, our own public rituals of relationship commitment, and of course wish to eliminate discrimination, many lesbians at least find the idea of duplicating the oppressive heterosexual *institution* of marriage alternately horrific and hilarious. I would argue that much of the debate about gay issues and the family last year similarly did this work of effacing a feminist critique of gender relations and patriarchal institutions.

'Gay' excludes lesbians

This point leads me to my most serious reservation. This is that 'gay' continues to be a term that at its best places women at second thought, and at worst totally excludes us. It is gay men, not lesbian women, who are being inscribed in this new age of gay legitimacy. And by thinking about lesbian women only as an afterthought to gay men, the feminist politics that have long accompanied lesbian activism are put even further from centre stage.

Literally, the Tasmanian campaign concerns men in the first instance. And *Priscilla* and *The Sum of Us* gave gay male characters prominence, with only odd marginal roles for lesbian characters. But my

concern is not only with the literal subject of the campaigns and discussions and media representations.

The popular ABC drama GP focused for a night last year on a lesbian masseuse who comes to work in the medical practice and makes this very point. Julie, the 'everybody's Mum' receptionist, is struggling with her homophobia, finding it particularly difficult to accept why the new masseuse insists on identifying as a *lesbian*. Why can't she just call herself *gay*, Julie wants to know. The lesbian woman replies - 'Well, when you hear *gay*, who do you think of?' Julie answers 'Men', and the penny drops. If, even in this new era of legitimacy for *gay*, most people naturally think of men when they think *gay*, what then happens to the specificity of the lives, needs, styles, and concerns of lesbians?

Even blatantly pro-gay opinion, or perhaps it's particularly pro-gay writing, makes the mistake of assuming that all gays are men. In a rave review of gay (male) writer Edmund White's new book, Australian writer and ABC broadcaster Robert Dessaix reveals his gender-blind perspective in two ways. He writes of *the world view of so many middle-class homosexuals in the West* delineated by *the cult of beauty (whether at the opera or at the gym), the sentimentalism, the materialism*. His generalisations do not fit lesbian culture, middle class or not.

This is familiar old-fashioned sexism - using the generic term but referring only to men. But he is also guilty of a new kind of twisted 'politically correct' sexism, where the absence of women, in a book in this case, must be commented on. A book about gay male culture that doesn't foreground women is not a problem for me. But Dessaix is bound to comment that *Women on the whole have walk-on parts in this collection but for some reason this bias is inoffensive. Perhaps it's because there is a definite*

humanity in the broadest sense in all of White's work. Having raised the absence of women, irrelevantly in my opinion, only to find it inoffensive, he turns to the oldest trick in the patriarchal book - the appeal to universal human truths. Once again, male experience, even if in this case it's gay male experience, can stand for female experience because it tells universal truths.

But a gay male universalism does not account for lesbians. The issue of the legal recognition of same sex relationships is an interesting example of the different investments lesbians may have in social policy change. Because of women's lower average income and women's greater likelihood of being sole parents, if entitlement to Social Security benefits and pensions were to be assessed with a same sex partner's income in mind then many more lesbians than gay men would be financially disadvantaged.

This doesn't mean that I disagree with moves to push for same sex relationship recognition, but it does mean that any such moves must be thought through with the different interests of the two groups in mind. So, what strategies of resistance can we adopt to avoid the pitfalls of the new inscription of the 'gay' citizen?

Avoiding the pitfalls

We can keep in mind that 'gay' is not a category in isolation from other social and cultural categories. Gay people not only have at least two genders, but cross ages, racial and ethnic groups, classes, political views, and the myriad of other positionings that contribute to the complexity of communities and individuals.

When we hear or read 'gay', we must ask 'Is this intended to mean *gay and lesbian*?' and if so, 'What lesbian perspectives are being obscured by the absence of the word?'. If lesbian perspectives are clearly not intended, then how would inclusion of lesbian points of

view challenge or change the statement? And if, as Dessaix suggests, what passes for a universal gay character also presumes white, Western and middle-class, what would the inclusion of Aboriginal, non-Anglo, Third World or working-class lesbians or gay men do to generalised statements and images?

I think that we need to be constantly aware of the traps of falling into simplistic either/or ways of seeing the issues. For example, the final report of the Federal IYF Committee passed the buck by saying that the issues that had been raised about gay and lesbian families were really human rights issues, not family policy issues. We must argue for homophobia and heterosexism to be on the human rights agenda *and* the family policy agenda. And the Industrial Relations Commission should grant specific family leave to workers *as well as* recognising the diversity of dependent relationships where caring takes place.

The new legitimacy of 'gay' on the public agenda opens up new possibilities, but also creates new battles to be fought. It gives us backing to take a critique of heterosexism into many avenues where there was previously no authority to go. But it may also be the grounds for a new complacency and a new disguise for the continuing invisibility of lesbians, and indeed non-white, non-middle class and non-Western gay men.

Making the new gay citizenship work for all of us means rejecting its assumptions as much as we celebrate our victories. It requires an increasing sophistication as we read and write contemporary culture.

Carol Johnson, 1994. Speech to launch *Sexual Economy* by Christine Beasley, Unpublished.

Robert Dessaix, 18-19 March 1995. *The Australian Review* p7

Visibility and invisibility of lesbians within the women's health movement

by Molly Claire and Sue McKinnon

The invitation to write this article for *Comment* was met with initial excitement at the possibility of starting a discussion with other lesbians working in women's health in South Australia. We envisaged how shared knowledge of our experiences could be used to challenge the homophobia which invisibilizes us.

As a result, we initiated and taped a discussion with other lesbian workers about the effects of this invisibility in the area of women's health. This brief opportunity barely started to uncover the pain and anger of our individual experiences, and an awareness of the need for a continuing conversation emerged.

We therefore view this article as a beginning. It does not represent the views of all lesbians in the women's health area. Rather, we write of our own experience and thoughts, with some references to the taped discussion.

Lesbian contributions to women's health

To understand the experiences of lesbian health workers it is important to consider the social and political context of lesbians and of women's health services. Each service/agency has arisen from the demands of local women (including lesbians) with the support of feminist and lesbian activists.

Women's health services have a commitment to responding to the needs and issues of local women in a context that

recognises the need for broader social change.

However we are also funded by a public health system with the constraints, expectations and pressures to be 'acceptable' in a culture of heterosexual dominance.

Despite these pressures, our lesbian/feminist passion, enthusiasm and commitment to justice for women has ensured that women's health is on the cutting edge of change. Lesbians have always been at the forefront of the women's health movement, however this has seldom been recognised in a positive way.

As lesbians we challenge the stereotypes, myths and oppression of women. We do not have male partners, which leaves us in some ways freer to fight for women's health and services. We have stepped outside women's prescribed experience, and we have a different vision gained from looking 'in' from the 'outside'.

There are some similarities in our experience of oppression to that of other marginalised groups, such as Aboriginal women or women with disabilities. This helps us recognise the impact of other oppressions, with the result that lesbians are often active in struggles against them.

Because of the pressure to remain invisible, this may be easier than tackling homophobia itself.

The impact of homophobia and invisibility

The prevailing social and cultural perceptions and myths about lesbians (as predatory, corrupting and 'sick') put us at risk of being scapegoated. The provision of health services for women is itself the subject of some hostility, and lesbians are a convenient target for those seeking to discredit women's health generally.

Women's health services have often been criticised for being 'a bunch of lesbians'. Detractors cast us both as a threatening element, and at the same time we are dismissed as

irrelevant, and certainly not requiring or deserving of services specific to our needs.

When lesbians do speak out, we are seen to be speaking personally, pushing our own barrow, 'going on about our own issues'. We can be labelled as angry and pushy. Responses like this trivialise us and prevent us being heard. We are often left with a sense of having been silenced.

Homophobia can also play a part in restricting 'straight' women's access to health services in which lesbians or lesbianism is visible. This may be because of their own fears, or because of the prejudices of powerful individuals and groups in their lives. For example, one heterosexual woman faced violence from her male partner when he discovered she was being supported by a lesbian health worker.

As lesbians we feel the frustration of a situation like this, where we are forced to make ourselves invisible so that other women can have the opportunity to receive a service. Homophobia creates the anxiety that we, and our services, will be seen as 'unsafe', corruptors of 'normal' women, and that we will therefore be undermined. This is another factor among many powerful pressures to hide our sexuality and 'pass' as straight.

The oppression and marginalisation created by homophobia are not often seen or talked about. They are reflected in the caution we use in deciding to use our voice, and the constant monitoring of our own behaviours.

One lesbian health worker commented that *to hear the word 'lesbian' said positively in a staff development session by someone not identifying as lesbian was amazing!*

Another commented that the service she works for is discussing the impact of being identified as a feminist service, however there is no discussion at this level of the impact of lesbian visibility within the

service. The decision about being identified as a lesbian remains an individual one.

The benefits of visibility

While visibility has the potential to be unsafe in the broader political context, invisibility means we do not claim achievements and recognition for our contribution as lesbians.

The discussion of lesbian visibility/invisibility helps to give us a language to describe the effects of homophobia and heterosexual dominance in our lives. It helps us and the services we work for to pinpoint potential areas for change.

We believe that some of the potential benefits if lesbians were visible in the women's health movement include:

- *reduced stress for lesbian workers who would no longer be living with the strain of concealing/not revealing a significant part of their identity*
- *some form of safety net, so lesbian workers themselves could choose visibility as they wanted*
- *acknowledgment of the possible numbers of lesbian workers and clients*
- *allocation of resources for specific lesbian projects*
- *acknowledgment and addressing of issues of control and violence in lesbian relationships*
- *community development projects (e.g. assisting a group of lesbian mothers to talk with their children's teachers)*
- *forums for discussion of lesbian health issues*
- *easily identifiable lesbian resources (e.g. for newly-out lesbians)*
- *identification of discrimination*
- *educational packages for workers on the effects of homophobic myths and stereotypes of lesbians*

Working in a straight jacket - the damage done by heterosexual dominance

The two discussions on the following pages were set up for this issue of *Comment* in order to explore the impact of heterosexual dominance and homophobia as they are experienced by lesbian and gay counsellors, clients and workers in the health/welfare area in South Australia. We had initially planned one interview; however, after several attempts to find mutually acceptable times, we ended up with two separate interviews, one with lesbians and one with gay men.

The intention was not, however, to pursue gender issues, or the different experiences and viewpoints of gay men and lesbians, although some differences have become clear in the course of these separate discussions. It is important to acknowledge that these differences do exist, and that lesbians have often been overlooked or made invisible by representations of a unified 'gay' experience which generally reflect the experience and interests of gay men. However, in the following discussions we have chosen to focus on the common ground for lesbians and gay men living and working in a world of heterosexual dominance.

One common concern for both groups was that, for some members of the group, disclosure of their real names might result in discrimination against them in their workplace. It was therefore decided that everyone would use false names for the purposes of publication of these discussions, although some of those involved were clear that in general they have a strong commitment to being out and open about their sexuality, and face no threat in the workplace as a result of this. Some other details have also been changed to avoid the possibility of identification.

The necessity for this caution is in itself a saddening reflection of the damage heterosexual dominance continues to wreak in people's lives, and the legitimate fear felt by lesbians and gay men of being identified in terms of their sexuality and their opinions about issues of sexuality. Discrimination and the threat of discrimination, by government agencies as well as the private sector, is certainly not a thing of the past. In South Australia, David Paul Jobling's dismissal from his position as artist-in-residence by the Education Department has been a much publicised reminder of the possible cost of being visibly gay.

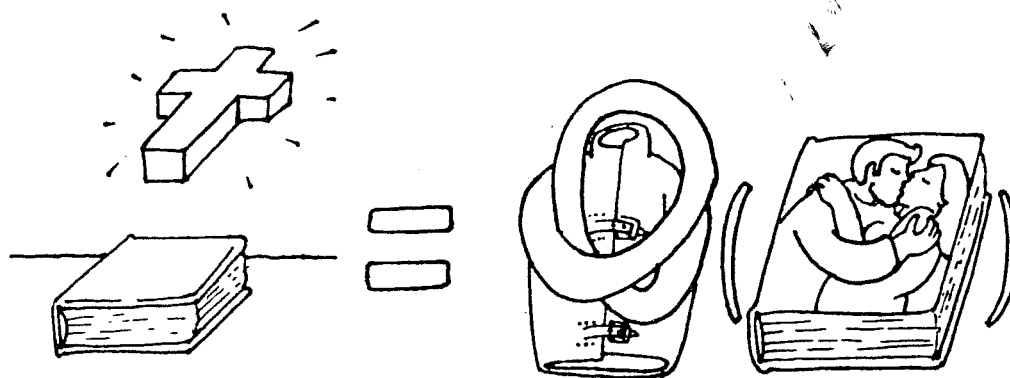
The decision to conceal the identities of those taking part in the following interviews resulted in much discussion, and was not taken lightly. Many of us acknowledged that there is a cost, both personal and political, in remaining hidden. We hope, however, that this issue of *Comment* will contribute to the creation of a climate where at last the 'straight' jacket of compulsory heterosexuality is the only thing left behind in the closet.

Some lesbian feminist views

What do we mean by *homophobia*, *heterosexism*, and *heterosexual dominance*?

Thelma: I think the word *homophobia* is used to put the problem of the experience of being discriminated against back on the body of people who are already weighed down by the problem.

I prefer to use the term *heterosexual dominance* because it clarifies the actual situation. Heterosexual dominance means the normalising of heterosexual attitudes, beliefs, lifestyle, to the exclusion of all others, and that's what happens in the society we live in.



A: CROSSOVER BOOK = STRAIGHTJACKET (STRAIGHT-JACKET)

Homophobia means the fear of lesbians and gay men, and it's probably reasonable for people with power to be frightened of lesbians, particularly lesbian feminists, because they are about changing the way things work and moving the power structures around, and devolving power.

If you're one of the power holders you'd have some fear about that! But homophobia is used far too broadly.

Suzy: I know phobia means fear, but in my experience homophobia is usually expressed as hatred, dislike or intolerance of gay men and lesbians, rather than fear.

The term *homophobia* for me expresses our daily experience of this hatred, and I would therefore be reluctant to abandon it. Using a feminist understanding of gender relations, I would define homophobia as comparable to

misogyny, heterosexism as comparable to sexism, and heterosexual dominance as comparable to patriarchy. I think these are all useful words, with distinct meanings.

People can be heterosexist without necessarily being homophobic. They can act in accordance with a structure in which heterosexual experience is dominant, but they may still like or feel positive towards gays and lesbians.

Louisa: I think we can get too caught up on language, although language is certainly important. I agree with Thelma that it's about exclusion, and it's about power. And I'm aware that I've incorporated a lot of it myself - I have my own share of homophobia, things that I've internalised.

Thelma: That's exactly why I've got a problem with the word homophobia. If we use the word *internalised homophobia*, somehow that becomes really personal as if it were you or me that has this problem. Whereas if you talk about *internalised oppression*, or having been colonised by a dominant view, then you can shove it out there and have a look at it and understand how it came to be, without necessarily 'owning' it.

A couple of years ago I went to a group for women to talk about homophobia. I had expected that a group of lesbians and non-lesbians would look at the effect of homophobia in their lives. The majority of the people who came to the group were lesbians, and, from the first night, it became clear that we would get caught into an exploration of homophobia 'within'.

It created a situation where they felt bad about themselves, and the homophobia they may have projected on to others. The whole thing got into this tight little navel-gazing knot, which was not what I had expected.

I think this was because of the name of the group. If it had been called *an exploration of heterosexual dominance* I think more heterosexual women would have come. People could still have talked about the personalised impact of internalising, but I think we would have discussed it in terms of power rather than 'I've got this thing wrong with me.'

It would have set a different framework and named things in a different way, and I believe we would have had different conversations.

Louisa: Yes, it's a fundamental shift in thinking to see it that other way. I agree that the word *homophobia* doesn't necessarily help an understanding of heterosexual dominance, because it focuses on the people who are already labouring under the oppression anyway.

Suzy: True. But people have to have an idea what *heterosexual dominance* means. At this stage in the debate it's a fairly unknown and unwieldy term. I've had people question whether heterosexual dominance means being the top in an SM relationship! (*laughter*) Homophobia is a more familiar term.

And what about *lesbophobia*? Do you think there's an oppression shared by lesbians which gay men don't experience?

Thelma: I've heard that term and I'm not really comfortable with it. *Misogyny* is the word I would think of first. Maybe some lesbians use *lesbophobia* because they feel invisibilised by the word *homophobia*. It appears to relate to homosexuality, which is usually used to mean men.

The experience for me is more about sexism, as a woman, and heterosexual dominance, as a lesbian.

Heterosexual dominance - what's the damage?

Louisa: The first thing that comes to mind is the exclusion, which happens in a whole range of ways. You're not as welcome or as validated if you look too different - for example, if your hair's too short.

Plus there are certain dominant and acceptable views, and acceptable ways to present them. People who are really different or who have different views to put forward are either seen as trouble-makers or not to be taken seriously.

The people who fit certain moulds, and the expected way of doing things, are welcomed into the informal, pally sort of networks which are based on

social networks that are heterosexual. If you're not part of the heterosexual networks, you don't get informed of social contacts and connections where a lot of decisions are made.

Suzy: So you experience these sorts of things happening not just to gays or lesbians, but to other people who don't fit the dominant mould?

Louisa: Yes, there are certainly similarities in terms of dominance.

Thelma: I think there are differences as well. For instance, I think the oppression of lesbians and gay men is not recognised or acknowledged.

A lesbian or gay man who stands up and speaks about these things is usually someone who is confident enough to say it in the first place, and people often respond by thinking, *It's obvious that they're not oppressed if they can stand up and say that*. The fact that it can be raised is seen to be evidence that, *Of course, it doesn't occur here*.

For instance, in an across-the-service meeting, I felt safe enough to say that I think it's a shame that I can't run a lesbian

group in my workplace. Other people sitting round the table, who were actually the power-brokers, said, *Yes, that is a shame, you know, if things were different...* If I were black and I were in a position to make that sort of comment, I don't think that the response would be, *Isn't it a shame we can't do that*. I think that's because of the invisibility of the gay and lesbian oppression.

Suzy: Yes, it's a different sort of oppression. Sexuality can be hidden, and this also means there can be greater access to privileges, good jobs etc - as long as you're prepared to be closeted.

Thelma: Absolutely. I don't see this as hierarchy of who's the most oppressed or anything. But it is something I think about a great deal, that, because it is invisible, this oppression is less acknowledged.

Sexuality can be hidden, and the oppression around it gets hidden too. To be working in a place that's supporting and caring, and still know that actually there are numerous lines that you can't cross, that's really quite troubling.



I think that heterosexuals just don't understand that you are constantly having to do a kind of self-limiting. You ask yourself, *What would be wise here? What can we just leave for the moment? What's not worth fighting about today?* And then other days, the rage gets too much and you think, *OK, I'm going to do it anyway.*

Struggling for visibility

Louisa: These issues around limiting arise for me as a manager too. For example, if one of the workers wanted to run a lesbian group, I would obviously have no problem with it myself. But I would probably ask myself what the consequences would be. I would have to weigh up the repercussions in other parts of the service.

Thelma: If you walk into almost any health/welfare type agency, or youth agency, the chances of you seeing anything in the waiting room that would reflect anything other than exclusive heterosexual lifestyle is zilch. There may be one but I haven't seen it - and I'm willing to be surprised, you know!

Even here, we have several lesbians working at this centre, and we still don't have anything on our walls that reflects this. We did have a conversation about what could we put up in the waiting room. We see a lot of people here, and many of them are lesbians. Once the word gets out that lesbians work some place, lesbians go there, because they feel safer. But the posters on our walls did nothing to reflect this.

So then we were presented with the problem: *where do you find images of ordinary lesbians and gay men?* We couldn't. We could find posters reflecting a particular sexual orientation and explicit sexual messages in posters, mostly through the AIDS Council. But that wasn't necessarily what we were looking for. That's fine in a particular context, but we wanted lesbians and gay men represented as ordinary pictures of ordinary people

doing all sorts of ordinary things, riding bikes, playing with their kids etc. No chance.

Louisa: We could have put up posters saying, *How many males and females in our posters do you think are lesbian or gay?* But we didn't. I don't think everybody here would be comfortable with that. I know that's a factor in my mind - so slowly, slowly we make changes.

Thelma: Some time ago we did have a lesbian poster up in our office here. It was quite okay when we were located in a private office space, but it became an issue when we shifted to a more public area - not for anyone else, but for the lesbians. We went through all this agonising, *Do we keep the poster up? Do we take the poster down? What would it mean if we take the poster down?*

Louisa: And here I was, the team manager - I was having sleepless nights about this bloody poster! Vacillating between, *They can put their poster up, I'd have it up if I was them!* to, *Oh my goodness, how could I phrase this, can we have the poster around the corner a bit?* We were having a big important event and there were lots of dignitaries coming who make decisions about funding. I was worrying that this one poster could mean the end of our funding!

But the extent of my anxiety about it amazed me. It just seemed to be completely out of all proportion to the poster itself. Then I got worried about that, like, *Why am I so worried about the poster, what's wrong with me?* And I had heaps of discussions with my partner about it.

Thelma: And so did all the other lesbians here. No-one had actually talked to anybody else at work, but we all knew this poster was trouble.

About two weeks after the visit of the VIPs I finally cracked the silence and said, *Oh god, I've been so worried about the poster.* And it came out that all the lesbians had been worried

about it! I was not the only person losing sleep. One of the women was on holiday, and while she was away she was worrying about it. She wasn't even here! And I'm thinking, *I can't take it down because it's ours, hers and mine, what would she say if I took it down?* My god, it was contorting!

Out of that has come what we call the *poster collective*, which is a group of lesbians who work in similar areas, and we meet and talk. The first time we met we spent the whole time talking about that poster, because it seemed so crazy.

Suzy: Yet it wasn't crazy - there's just such a huge pressure to conform to heterosexual dominance.

Louisa: I felt really pissed off - I'd got better things to worry and lose sleep about than that. But it was a good experience for me in terms of trying to turn that around in myself, to find a way to be powerful in it. Talking about it, and starting the poster group, has been a good outcome.

Thelma: The group has been great. We meet regularly and we're exchanging experiences that we have as lesbian feminists in the public service. Having a space where we can speak about the role of heterosexual dominance, I doubt that a poster-type incident will occur again, or cause us the kind of trouble that it did.

Being 'out' in the workplace.

Louisa: I'm currently working in a new place, so I have had to deal with coming out. I think I'm the only lesbian (of course one never knows). A number of people know I'm a lesbian, but I'm very careful about who I wish to have this information about me.

The blatantness of heterosexual dominance is more apparent to me at the moment because I am in this new work environment. The heterosexual jokes, the assumptions that if I use the term *we*, the other

person is a man, have just taken me completely by surprise. And in general, I can't count the times I've sat in a room with people who are rampantly heterosexual and have no trouble whatsoever about telling me that, over and over and over.

Suzy: Are there times when it's relevant in a counselling situation for you to be out as a lesbian?

Thelma: Yes. I think there are times when it's appropriate, in the same way as I might, when it's relevant, share some other aspect of my life. As a therapist it's important to know when it's appropriate to move in or out of that kind of disclosure.

But I'm pretty careful about it, obviously. For instance, if I'm seeing a young woman, I think about issues like that. I can make an educated guess on what this young person's view of a lesbian is, and the chances are it's not too good.

I can only think of one time that I disclosed to a younger woman, which was when a young lesbian came and sought out a lesbian counsellor. I thought it was important for me to acknowledge that to her because I didn't look mad and I didn't prance and have horns on my head. I could model that nothing bad was going to happen, because this was the way she was choosing to pursue her life choices.

Suzy: What do you think is the impact of internalised homophobia (although I agree that's an imperfect term) when you work with gay or lesbian clients? Do you believe that you can have a role as a counsellor to help people move away from that?

Louisa: I think so. But I don't think that internalized oppression is different from other demeaning labels. It could be about a whole range of things people come feeling oppressed by: being a lesbian, wetting the bed, or messages like, *you're 25 and you still live at home - oh oh, something's wrong with you.*

The way in which I work wouldn't be any different. I would be inviting the person into a conversation that would explore: a) how these ideas got to be constructed (this may not be the language used of course) and b) whose interests do they serve, are these things that are helpful for you? Because they're actually only beliefs, not truths.

Thelma: As a lesbian, another problem arises for me when I am working with people who've been sexually assaulted, and with their mothers. Once when I was working in another place I was taking my turn doing child care. I was playing aeroplanes with this little girl. I was lying on my back and had her balanced on my feet holding her hands and whizzing her around.

Her mother came through the door, and I know what passed over her face, I know it because I'm a lesbian and I've seen that look directed at me before. The horror that she would think her little girl might be in some danger with me, when in fact she was having a great time, and was in no way in danger. The terror that woman had to deal with - because of course she wouldn't know how to confront me about that, and didn't. She didn't have to. I saw the look, I know what that meant. And of course, the little girl and I never played again.

Suzy: It's a very damaging myth isn't it, that homosexuality is totally uncontrollable, rampant and predatory?

Thelma: And that lesbians and gay men assault children. I mean, excuse me! Just take a look and see who's assaulting children - overwhelmingly it's heterosexual men! But people read the newspapers about paedophiles, which they then wrongly connect with gay men.

Heterosexual dominance hurts heterosexuals too

Louisa: Heterosexual dominance hurts heterosexuals too. It constrains them. It robs

them of certain experiences in their lives. It robs them of speaking of those experiences, or of feeling comfortable with those experiences.

When my son was about 12 he and his friend were surfing down at one of the local beaches. It was one of those really fantastic Australian days. The sun was shining and we were at the beach, and the surf was beautiful. A magic day.

Ben and his mate, Owen, were out on their boards and they were hurtling around, they were coming in on a wave, and they held hands, coming in shrieking at the tops of their voices. They were so absolutely in this experience, and they looked so beautiful. They just loved each other, and it was a lovely thing to see. And I knew that the time was coming that they would not be allowed to do that. They would not be allowed to have that experience, or if they did, they would pay a high price. They would have to stop themselves, or someone else would stop them.

It was one of those moments, a freeze-frame. It said everything to me about it really - homophobia was going to rob my child of being all of whom he could be, and make him disown experiences that he has had. I was very struck by the sadness of it.

Getting heterosexual dominance on the agenda in human service agencies

Thelma: The fact that it's not seen as an issue that requires any exploring is the major problem. Even very basic things, like having some vague notion of how many lesbians and gay men there might be around. I would have thought the generally accepted figure of about one in ten was commonly understood. But it's not. If I use this figure, people often think I'm exaggerating.

10% is not a bad figure if you consider the size of other minority populations. Services and finances are directed towards the particular issues

that many other minority groups face - and rightly so, I don't have a beef about that. But these services and funding are not available to us.

If you look at the national health goals for Australia under the issues of mental health, the death of young people, the suicide rate, the death rates, the rates of alcoholism, there's no reference to lesbians or gays. It is not acknowledged anywhere in national health policy.

And so when the state governments and individual agencies are putting up for funding and grants, nowhere can you see the significance or the impact of heterosexual dominance, particularly on young lesbian and gays, the impact that results in death and drug and alcohol issues, and homelessness, and interpersonal violence. It just doesn't exist in that information base.

Suzy: Should there be more research in this area?

Thelma: Well, it's difficult. I think that we should be reflected in national health figures like other groups - why not, we represent 10% of the population? In terms of the visibility, that's very important.

Then I have a reservation, because that's not the kind of picture that we want to promote. It feeds into all the utterly negative stereotypes of being lesbian or gay. As if we're just people who top ourselves in large numbers and abuse alcohol, not just ordinary daggy human beings who go to the botanic gardens and the movies, and lie in bed Sunday mornings with their lovers. So it would need to be done in certain ways that that kind of backlash response could be picked up and dealt with.

I do think it's a multi-faceted problem. Visibility is really of the utmost importance - but here we are having this conversation where we've asked you not to use our real names! And the complexity remains our problem, although it's not, it shouldn't be that way. It's made our problem

because of heterosexual dominance.

Suzy: Which brings us back to the need for heterosexuals out there to recognise heterosexual dominance and do something about it, instead of expecting gays and lesbians to always take the risks. Have you known any heterosexuals where you work who've taken on these issues and tried to make any changes?

Thelma: In this work-place the level of acceptance, genuine acceptance, respect and caring for each other is quite high. It's not accompanied by an understanding that I might be an oppressed person yet, but I'm willing to accept the genuine good feelings that are here. I can raise things and people will listen respectfully.

And I think that there are some places and some people that make attempts to take on these issues. There's one man I know who, to his credit, has made some genuine moves in that direction. He is supportive and really quite a lovely man. Even though he can't have a full understanding, he's willing to believe a lesbian's expression of oppression. The Dulwich Centre holding meetings and publishing this newsletter is another attempt.

They may be drops in a large ocean but it is important that it happens. They will promote ripples, there will be conversations, and it's better to have them. But there's a long way to go.

Louisa: One small thing happened when I had lunch with some people from my old workplace after I'd been in the new place for a little while. Two of the people at the table were straight, and one was lesbian. She said, *Have you come out yet at work?* and I said, *I had two opportunities but I didn't want to. It was on Friday, and I thought I might wait till a Monday, so they're stuck with the fact that I'm there.* I was describing all this strategising, and what was really really nice was that the man said, *It's really hidden isn't it, this oppression!*

It was a genuinely eye-opening experience and I'm quite sure he felt angry that I would have to be going through something like that.

This was not a man who's famous for his understanding of the position of lesbians, but he felt this as someone who cares about and likes me. And then the straight woman said, *It must be dreadful to have to keep making that decision about whether and how you're going to come out.*

That particular lunch-time gathering really warmed my heart because there was no question that their caring for me was genuine, and they suddenly got a glimpse of something that made them uncomfortable on my behalf.

I'll carry that experience with me for a while.



WORKING IN A STRAIGHT JACKET - Gay counsellors in discussion

The impact of homophobia and heterosexual dominance

Chris: I think there's two distinct types of homophobia, *external* and *internal* homophobia. A lot of gays have to deal with their own fears about coming out, who they are, first. When you do talk about homophobia it could be your own homophobia that you're addressing, not somebody else's.

Nick: But there are very real reasons why people have *internal* or *internalized* homophobia, in terms of their

reactions to a situation. There may be a number of punishments for, or constraints on, coming out that are based in reality. That's because of heterosexual dominance and the heterosexism of the system that we have.

John: Yes, that's true, the fear of being gay in a heterosexual system is a very real fear. But there's also a homophobia that gay people have for other different types of gay people. For example, some people hate queens. They'll come right out and say, *I hate those bastards.*

Nick: I think that is one of the effects of marginalisation on the gay community. It creates a pressure to see yourself as not part of particular subcultures.

I see it in terms of trying to find self-acceptance, and self-love. So many of the images of what it means to be gay are

very negative. You think of sodomy, promiscuous sex, dirty toilets... People don't want to associate themselves with these sorts of negative images, but they do want to be gay and feel okay about who they are.

So we separate ourselves from those images as a way of protecting ourselves by saying, *That's them over there, that's not me, I can still be gay but I don't have to take on that.* But what we're actually doing is highlighting our diversities and differences, and saying difference is not good.

Chris: I think we can get really hooked into the pathology of it - the negativity and low self-esteem. But I can only relate my own experience, and I haven't experienced that stuff.

I celebrate the huge difference in the gay community that I belong to, and I love it,

because it is so different. I love the fact that there are queens, and I love the drag.

Nick: You mentioned pathology, and the reality is that it is not being gay that is the pathology. It is quite human to want to be 'normal' in the sense you want to actually be part of a particular group and be accepted with a seal of 'you're okay.' The pathology belongs not to the gay but to the whole wider system of heterosexism and homophobia.

Chris: I worked in a centre where the director was highly homophobic towards me. I'd walk into a room and he'd say, *Oh, here comes Chris again, backs to the wall!* and laugh, and everyone would titter about it. I'd started to buy into this by thinking, *This is horrible, I'm feeling awful about this.* And then I thought, *I don't have to feel awful about this any more.*

So the next time he did it I said, *I want to talk to you. You have to stop this. If you don't, I'll have you for it.* And he said, *Oh, you don't have any sense of humour Chris, what's wrong with you?* So I said, *I've got a really good sense of humour, but I don't have to put up with this stuff!* That means I took the power myself, not to put up with that crap.

I see so many people who don't, or can't. This is not a criticism, because sometimes it's their circumstances or socialisation that doesn't enable them to be able to take the power in that situation. That's true for both gay men and lesbians. Maybe through not having the mechanisms or skills, but they do buy into that negativity.

Suzy: I don't feel comfortable with the idea of talking of 'buying into' homophobia. There are some situations where it's very hard to 'take the power', like when your job is threatened or in situations of physical violence. As a woman, I think this is very clear to me. For example, when I was in London living in a recognisably lesbian community, a local gang of young men tried to set my house on fire. How can you not 'buy into' that? There are levels at which people simply don't have that personal power.

Graham: Also when gay men have been bashed they often blame themselves rather than anything else, because there are a lot of messages that it's their fault.

John: The first thing a lot of people say when they've had a pretty horrific bashing is *If I wasn't gay it wouldn't have happened.* That's how they see it, the cause of them getting bashed is their gayness - not the homophobia out there.

It's terrible stuff, and it's hard to get people out of that way of thinking. It takes a lot of work in a counselling session, just to get them over their guilt.

Chris: It's not surprising though. That's how so much of society sees it. *They're gay,*

they deserve to be bashed is the message that gets put across a lot. Look at any of the gay bashings that have occurred in this city - how has the *Advertiser* dealt with them? There's all that horrible undercurrent of homophobia that they put out all the time. These messages feed into the internal homophobia... and it's easier to fall into that self-hate in a time of crisis.

Suzy: I think that homophobic decisions by the legal system also give great authority to the view of gays as somehow deserving of violence. A couple of years ago an older gay man was severely bashed in the Adelaide parklands by two young men - and they got off on a plea of self-defence, because he had made a sexual advance. It's so acceptable as a defence, it's even got its own name - the *homosexual panic defence*. As if panic at a homosexual advance was the most natural thing in the world!

Issues of visibility

John: We experienced another example of discrimination recently when we tried to advertise a group for gay and bisexual men living in rural South Australia in the country newspapers. They wouldn't have a bar of it. We had to change the words in the ad to *country men*.

We couldn't even use the word *gay* or *bisexual* in any of the country rural newspapers in South Australia. That's when you're reminded that you're fighting something bigger than you can deal with.

Chris: I think we can deal with it! That socialised homophobia needs to be tackled right at its roots. You've got to keep nibbling at their heels, otherwise it does become absolutely insurmountable and we'll be crushed underneath it.

I've particularly noticed it working in a government department. There's entrenched homophobia there right now. I never hide that I'm

gay, I'm very open about it, and sometimes I get negative feedback from that.

It's very subtle stuff. It's about a look, or a non-inclusion in something. You might not be invited to a particular meeting because you're gay. But I choose not to buy into that now, because I force myself to say, *I should be here.* I just keep at it, I don't let people push me under the carpet or put me down. Eventually they've either got to reject me out of hand and not have anything to do with me, or they've got to have some level of acceptance of who I am.

For some people, that's not a possibility. A lot of the clients I deal with don't have the skills to be able to do that. Part of my counselling is to get them to a point where they do have some skills about being out, and being who they are.

John: Sure, but it's not just about skills. It's often much easier in an office environment (and often not easy there!) than on the factory floor, for instance. Environment has a lot to do with it.

I work in a gay organisation, and I ring people up and say *It's John here, from (gay organisation).* The reaction I often get is shocked, like, *from where?* [laughter] My partner's not out where he works. One day I rang him and said automatically, *It's John here, from (gay organisation)!* [laughter] So I have to be careful that I don't out people too!

Nick: Whether you are openly gay, or whether you have been assumed to be gay, as a counsellor I think you're open to the potential of having your work questioned much more than a heterosexual.

For example, I was working with a young person in a program I was co-ordinating. His foster-parents, in the course of a meeting with me, made the assumption that I was gay. They then put assumption with myth and came up with the conclusion I was a paedophile, and decided that

the child was at risk.

They rang my supervisor and said what their concerns were. My supervisor told the foster parents that it was a serious allegation, and talked about the assumptions that they were making, the myths such assumptions were based on etc. My supervisor also questioned me about the incident.

It's quite legitimate that a supervisor ask questions when an issue like this raised, because their primary interest is ensuring that the child is safe. I don't mind being questioned on my practice. However this incident shows that, because of the myths about gay men, I'm more likely to be questioned about my practices than someone else.

I was very annoyed about the whole thing and confronted the foster-parents. To cut a long story short, they eventually apologised for assuming that I was gay! They didn't actually apologise for assuming that a child would automatically be in danger of being molested by a gay man.

Chris: In that situation I would have said, *I am a gay man, and this is my job. If that's a problem to you, I'm happy to withdraw from this case. If it's not a problem to you, or you'd just like to talk with me about it, that's okay.* But I'd do it with my supervisor present, I wouldn't talk to them by myself.

Nick: That's a legitimate way of going, however I wouldn't give the power to the foster-parents to decide what program the child is going to attend. To allow homophobia to deny this service to the child - I think there's a dilemma in that. I think it raises the issues about their ability to be foster-parents, rather than my ability to be a therapist to that child.

Suzy: Many people would say that homophobia an issue, but we're working with far more important issues. Or *It is important but we're not like that, we're all nice people here. We treat everybody the*

same!... [laughter] What they really mean is, *We treat everybody as if they're heterosexual.*

How would you argue that this is a real priority for people working in your profession to take on, and to make some changes?

Chris: Because the need is presented to you so clearly. It's such a heavy issue for a lot of people to deal with. It causes so much pain to so many people.

Graham: How it affects me (and this would be true for many clients too) is that, once again, what I'm trying to say is being dismissed. What is essentially me is being unvalued, made invisible. It's like not being represented on television. If you were to say that it's not an important issue then I go away tightening up and saying, *Okay, I'm going away to hide again.*

Suzy: So it causes a lot of pain?

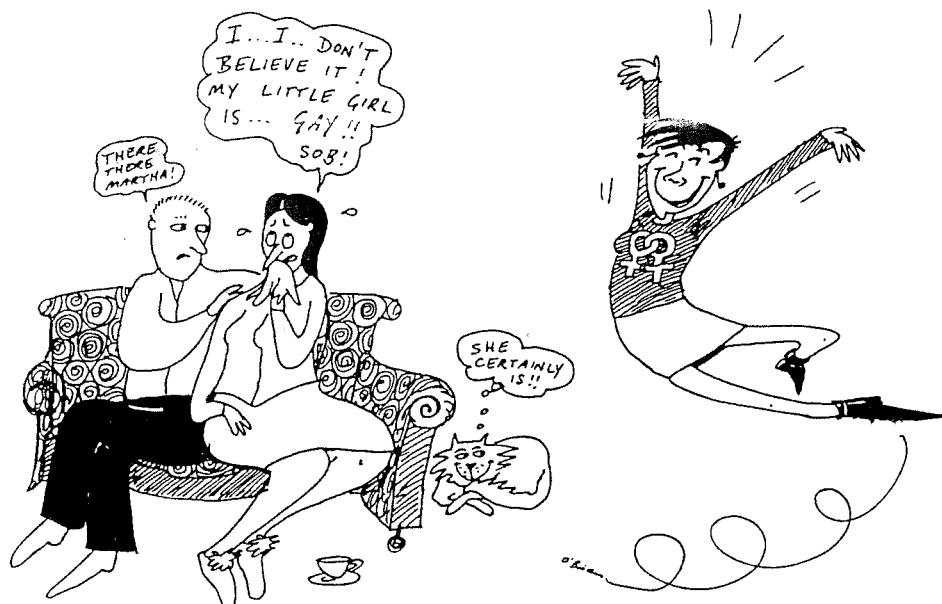
John: Of course! Homophobia continues to do that, constantly.

Working with gay and lesbian clients

Nick: My main experience is working with young people in a counselling and therapeutic setting, not necessarily focusing on young people who are gay. I've always taken the line that when working with them my sexuality is not an issue. I'm quite comfortable talking about diverse sexualities if it comes up for the young person.

When clients raise the issue of homosexuality, counsellors will often just refer them on to someone else who's a 'specialist' in that area. Adolescence is a period where *everyone* is dealing with the issue of sexuality, and it needs to be an important part of any therapeutic process. You're not talking about some subgroup that has an issue with sexuality.

Counsellors should be able to look at what a person's going through in that area, whether



they are heterosexual or homosexual. They need to understand and work with diverse sexualities.

John: The counselling that I do is with men who are coming out for the first time. The first contact is them saying, *I think I might be gay.* That's a really scary thing. Those words are so hard for people to get out.

Older people who are coming out are so isolated too, because if they were to come out to their friends they'd probably lose them. A lot of them do, and so they have to start again. It's even really hard for people who are going to identify as bisexual, because that's another iffy area.

I try to point out to my clients that you don't have to be gay or heterosexual, you can enjoy your sexuality as it is and own it for yourself.

Nick: Clients often come with all those negative perceptions, which means that a lot of doors for self-exploration are closed off for them. It's painful sometimes when you see young people, and you get the feeling that this is an issue. And you just know that they're really in touch with all the reasons why they shouldn't be saying anything to you.

There are very few people their own age they could actually identify with, and get to be part

of that feeling that they belong. I've tried to match some young people up with other young gay people to help them find where they're at. It's really unfortunate that young gays don't have a legitimate lifestyle, one that they can channel into, that's just an average young scene.

John: One of the things that I've found really useful is the use of support groups. That's probably one of the best things for people coming out, because they can relate to other people who are similar to themselves and just get a sense of belonging.

Graham: Yes, I think the value of a group is incredible. It's hard if you're gay to do very well on self-esteem. One of the big things a group does is you get to belong, to say, *I'm okay.*

Nick: In more mainstream organisations, it's ironic that those who most need doors opened for them to actually discuss the issue of sexuality, that is young gays and lesbians, are the ones who will actually have the door closed.

As you say, to raise the issue, to say, *I'm gay* or *I'm thinking about being gay*, is a great big step. Those young people who most need to be given permission to say it, and go against the norm, are not given that permission.

We don't have any posters in mainstream organisations of people saying things like, *Do you think you might be gay? or, It's okay to raise it.* There are no okay messages about raising it. It's an issue that service providers *should* be dealing with as it involves the mental health of people, particularly young people.

Chris: Another factor for young people coming out now is HIV. That's another huge dimension to deal with...

John: Some young people who I've talked to find that it's not a problem because they've grown up with messages about condoms and safe sex. They haven't had to make the adjustments that you or I might have had to make.

Chris: I was thinking more from the point of view of society's messages around HIV which are still so blaming, despite all the work that has been done - that it's gay men getting this disease, and spreading it, and they should be locked up. I'm concerned about the level of homophobia facing a young person coming out in that environment.

John: Yes. And the attitude is, if someone does come out really young, *Oh well, you'll end up with AIDS.* It's just brushed off as an expected thing.

Nick: For young people (although this is certainly not something that's specific only for young people), there's the issue of having to negotiate safe sex, having to feel powerful enough to say no. People are growing up with the idea of condoms, but they're still young people working out, *When do I say no to something? What are my barriers? What are my limits?* That's a dangerous time to be in.

Suzu: Do you think that heterosexual counsellors are generally well equipped to work with gay men and lesbians?

Nick: I don't think the sexuality of the counsellor is important. I think there are occasions where a client may benefit from having a therapist or counsellor who is gay, but I don't think that the counsellor's sexuality means that they necessarily have the ability to deal with issues of sexuality.

Chris: In general I would say the same. But then I remember many instances where their heterosexuality has played a big part in a counsellor not being able to deal with a gay man. Because they haven't identified the issues themselves, they can't raise them.

For example, when taking sexual histories properly when you're talking with somebody about HIV counselling. A lot of things don't get raised by people claiming to be counsellors, like doctors, when they should be.

Nick: I certainly don't disagree with that, and I think that their sexuality is a block, but I'm hesitant to go the next step and say that if you are a particular sexuality then you can only deal with a person of that sexuality.

Suzu: In my experience, a lot of heterosexual counsellors aren't equipped to understand, and do not equip themselves to understand, issues that may affect gay men, lesbians and bisexuals, such as the impact of homophobia and heterosexism on our lives. For example, I went to a counsellor who was

heterosexual. She spent most of the session finding out what it was like to be a lesbian. And then she ended up by saying she was glad she wasn't in my shoes! [laughter] ... It gave me nothing. I felt I had been an educational experience for her, and I paid for it!

Nick: Don't you think that's bad professionalism?

Suzu: Absolutely. But I suspect a lesbian counsellor would not have demonstrated 'bad professionalism' in this way. Another heterosexual counsellor would not necessarily do so either. I have worked really successfully with a heterosexual counsellor, and that was a good experience for me. She did demonstrate heterosexism. There were things she assumed, or didn't understand, but she was willing to listen and learn.

Nick: Yes. Making the effort to equip themselves, that's the issue.

Chris: Many of my clients have previously been to heterosexual counsellors who saw their gayness as a problem. Or as *the* problem. Especially young people. Their parents take them to see somebody because they've got a problem, and the problem is that they're gay! But the client can be any age. Counsellors will take it on board, and accept that being gay is itself a problem.

Nick: The other side of that is the parent whose teenager can have any problem, but it can't be that they're gay. In other words, if you even bring up that perhaps there's an issue here of them being gay, they don't want to talk about it. Any other problem would be better than that! [laughter]

Addressing homophobia and heterosexism in the health/welfare area

Nick: It's partly about getting in touch with and challenging our own internalised homophobia so that we ourselves can act, and say, *Okay, what do I personally want to do about this situation? What risks and*

what consequences do I need to weigh out?

It's also about, as Chris was saying earlier, constantly nibbling at their heels. If you're in a professional organisation, and arguing on a professional basis, these myths and assumptions (that you are pathological, or promiscuous, or have AIDS) can be challenged when they are brought out in the open.

And then you can actually say, *Okay, I want a policy on this. And then I want some procedures. And then I want some changes.*

We have to get them the facts and figures. A legitimate government agency can't look at the facts and figures and say, for example, the majority of people who abuse kids are gay people. They can't say that because the facts show it isn't true.

John: Yes, that could work in a government agency. But most people out there don't have a clue. I think the mainstream media has to change. We need to change those messages if large-scale change is to occur.

Chris: Something else that's really important is a focus on training people. Getting them to look at their values and attitudes. It's not just about workers in government departments - it's about workers in factories.

Nick: The techniques of doing that are getting people to look at their early learning about gay and lesbian people. Confront them with some facts about that, look at where those values have come from, and tell them one thing they've really got to do is to get to know gay people as well. Those are the steps that people need to take, and the first one is actually raising the issue.

Suzu: Who should be doing that? Should it always be lesbians and gay men raising the issue?

Chris: No, it should be part of the legitimate health services, it should be every-

one's responsibility to see this addressed.

Nick: I think that there's no question who *should* be doing it. It's obviously those who are responsible for the health and welfare of people in this state.

Chris: There needs to be a publicity campaign, getting the information out into mainstream organisations with posters. *The Grim Reaper* was a publicity campaign, and it was a bloody effective one. And it got 7,000 people to come into the clinic and get HIV tests. From the point of view of triggering people's awareness of HIV, it was perfect. What it lacked, hugely, was an education side.

Any promotional campaign about gay and lesbian health has to go hand-in-hand with educational programs for health workers and bureaucrats. Looking at values, attitudes, getting in touch with their own homophobia. Until you tackle that, they will never make the necessary changes.

The reason there's any work being done in this area at all is because of HIV. That to me is really sad, that they have to have a disease of the magnitude of HIV in order for them to address things like gay and lesbian health, or homophobia. Gay men and lesbians are 10% of our community, so why aren't health services targeted to our needs as well?

Suzu: There's not much understanding that homophobia isn't primarily a gay and lesbian issue, it's actually a heterosexual issue.

Nick: It's still within the parameters of, *This is a gay health issue*. There's not an acceptance (and certainly not a promotion) of gay lifestyles. I don't think values in society have changed that much.



Lesbians and gays in the classroom

• *"Being gay in school is like this: imagine you're in a place where everybody is blind and incredibly racist. You are black, you know you are black and you know that if everyone else knew they would hate you. You think there are probably some other black people in the place, but you don't know who they are, because you're blind."*

Andrew Cooper (not his real name) knew he was gay throughout his high school years, but he didn't tell a soul. He says if he had come out, he wouldn't have survived.

"I'd have been bashed every day, and driven out. It was bad enough when they didn't know. I was always the butt of the running insult: "Poof!" or "Faggot!" tossed at you as people go past. It didn't mean they knew you were gay, it was just their way of putting people down.... You try to avoid giving them an excuse to pin the label on you. The constant unspoken message throughout school was this: 'Even though we don't know it, you're not one of us and if we ever find out, your life won't be worth living!'"

• In at least one Sydney school, the rugby players psych themselves up before a match by telling each other, *"We're going to kill the faggots!"*

• *"If one of the leaders of your group writes something anti-gay on the toilet wall, you figure you'd better write something too, just to be on the safe side."* - Sam, a Year 10 student.

• Everyone HQ spoke to said girls were much more flexible than boys in their attitudes to homosexuality, usually more likely to argue for the individual's right to be free of harassment.

This is not to say that girls do not harass other girls. When Jennifer Glass came out at her school at the age of fourteen she was taunted with "lezzo", "lemon" and "dyke" by some of her classmates, and felt very isolated. *"But by Year 11 they'd matured, and my sexuality just wasn't an issue any more. I quite enjoyed my last two years at school, though having good lesbian friends outside was really important."*

• From 'Boy Trouble', Jane Wheatley, HQ Magazine Nov/Dec 94.

Surviving gay adolescence

by Kenton Penley Miller

A look around any high school will reveal that lesbian, gay and bisexual adolescents are probably the loneliest, most rejected and unhappy students on campus - that is, if they're not the most invisible students on campus.

Sadly, homophobia is rampant in our society, and high schools, colleges and universities are no exception. There are few real choices of action open to gay, lesbian and bisexual students. Not many are confident enough to be upfront, out and proud at this stage of their development. Rather, the majority decide to lay low, suffer silently and hope that no one finds out about their sexuality.

This method of operating was highlighted by a recent Western Australian report which stated that more than 70% of young men who suspected they were homosexual had not told their families, and just under half had not told anyone about their feelings.

Others decide to have a try at passing as heterosexual, learning from a young age how to lead a double life and to hide their true selves. If they are 'out', willingly or unwillingly, they are likely to be discriminated against by their peers, their teachers and by the organisational structure where they are studying. This discrimination driven by homophobia can take many destructive forms and includes verbal, physical and psychological abuse, isolation and exclusion.

The pressures of isolation and concealment

Adolescence is a time when most young people want to identify strongly with a peer group. Even to have the same brand-name clothes as one's peers can be vital for inclusion

into a group in many areas. However, for gay, lesbian and bisexual young people the group that they can readily identify with is not visibly waiting in the wings.

While acknowledging that other 'minorities' can also have a very difficult time in adolescence, we can see that they can find some comfort and strength by grouping together with 'like' people. For instance, in the case of ethnic minorities there is also an umbrella of a larger community providing a group with whom to identify, and which can often provide support, social activities, opportunities to learn of their history, cultural learning to develop pride, and, very importantly, a sense of belonging. Students from ethnic minorities are also much more likely to have a supportive immediate and extended family to talk to, and to receive comfort and assistance from when the going gets tough.

Many gay, lesbian or bisexual young people who keep their sexuality hidden feel that they must be the only one in the school, if not the whole town or city, and that something is very wrong with them for feeling the way they do. While other students are enjoying the their rites of passage, like school formals, end-of-year socials, first dates and parties, young people hiding their sexuality are having a rotten time.

If they have decided keeping quiet is the best survival strategy for them, they can find themselves leading difficult, intricate double lives. They often invent fictitious boy-friends and girlfriends as a cover, join in with their classmates' homophobic jokes or go through the motions of asking opposite-sex friends for dates and pretending.



The fear of being discovered and exposed, and the consequences of this pretence, are immense. Many will go to great lengths to hide their homosexuality, often even from themselves.

The consequences

Many undesirable consequences that can occur when these issues for young gay, lesbian and bisexual people are not addressed include:

- **Homelessness:** Many are forced out by their parents when their sexuality is made known. American figures suggest that 25% of young homeless people are homeless as a result of discrimination encountered after they disclose their sexuality.
- **Alcohol and other drug problems:** The need to escape painful feelings makes drug use an attractive short-term option. Lesbian and gay young people belong to two groups at high risk for drug problems: homosexuals and adolescents. Studies in the US have shown that about 30% of both the lesbian and gay male population have responded to homophobia with alcohol abuse problems (a rate much greater than that of the

heterosexual population), and that the rate is even higher amongst gay youth.

- **Avoidance of subjects and career choices:** Lesbian and gay adolescents may well steer clear of jobs that appear to be stereotypical, such as hair-dressing and careers in the arts for young men.
- **Leaving school prematurely:** This often limits educational possibilities and economic viability in the future. Truancy and dropping out are often taken as evidence that sexual minority young people are a particularly problematic population. But this behaviour should more rightly be seen as a coping strategy, born of desperation when authorities fail to provide a safe learning environment.
- **Violence:** Both physical and verbal. Homophobia is so pervasive that many people do not perceive mistreatment of gay, bisexual and lesbian youth as wrong. Harassment is not seen as violence, but as a 'natural' response.

Much of the violence is carried out by groups of fourteen to fifteen year old young men. Each time adults in positions of responsibility remain silent

or look the other way when homophobic harassment occurs, children are learning that it is acceptable to tolerate or even participate in homophobic violence.

- **Unsafe sex choices:** We know that self esteem plays an important role in decisions about sexual safety. Some girls may deliberately get pregnant or have sex with many boys in order to 'prove' their heterosexuality. We also know that young gay and bisexual men have the highest incidence of HIV infections.

The final escape

One of the most distressing effects of homophobia is that many young people are driven to make a final escape through suicide. Australia's high rate of youth suicide is well documented (Australia has the highest rate of youth suicide in the industrial world, and suicide is now the second most common form of death amongst young Australian males). But nobody knows for sure how many of these untimely deaths were of young lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, because no agency has yet bothered to research the data.

American statistics reveal that gay, lesbian and bisexual youth are *two to three times* more at risk than heterosexual young people. The overseas findings and our own anecdotal evidence of actual and attempted suicides demonstrate the urgent need for such data to be collected in Australia. This evidence would provide crucial further support to preventative programs currently being developed in our education and health sectors.

Why does it happen?

The strongly worded findings of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Task Force on Youth Suicide (which after many years has still only achieved 'unofficial' release) provide a succinct description of the homophobic environmental pressures leading to suicide. Although this report is North American,

the following description is depressingly familiar to the Australian observer.

'Gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people. Gay youth face a hostile and condemning environment, verbal and physical abuse, and rejection and isolation from families and peers (an estimated 25% of young gay males are forced to leave home because of conflicts over their sexual identity).

The traumatic consequences of these external pressures make gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual youth more vulnerable than other youth to a variety of psychosocial problems and self-destructive behaviour, including substance abuse, chronic depression, relationship conflicts and school failure, each of which are risk factors for suicidal feelings and behaviour."

As one young person from Adelaide who survived a suicidal adolescence describes their experience;

"It was the feeling of not being able to talk about [being gay], not to parents or friends, not knowing of any support, always being the one who was hassled at school... I suppose it began as a general depression, but I couldn't pass a bridge or a cliff without thinking of jumping off."

Gayline, a local Adelaide counselling service that receives about four hundred calls a year from young people lists talk of suicide as a major presenting problem. Counsellors who deal with identified bisexual, lesbian and gay young people also have a keen awareness of the issue here in South Australia.

"The young men we deal with range from those who readily accept they're attracted to men, and have been from a very young age, through to those who go out and have considerable sexual contact with young women in order to prove they're not gay... Suicide can be seen as preferable to having

Gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people

their sexuality discovered. We see a number of young people who openly talk about suicide."

Kenton Miller's investigation of the State Coroner's files in South Australia has indicated how difficult it is to identify whether a young person who has suicided was gay, and whether this impacted on their decision to take their own life. There are a number of reasons for this. Information about the person's sexuality is generally not sought through the police investigation, and was often concealed from or unknown to family and friends.

Although this research could not provide reliable statistics of suicide levels, there was much harrowing evidence that homophobia had played a part in a number of suicides. For example, one young man had written the following in his diary, after a failed attempt at heterosexual foreplay left him nauseous:

"It was after this night that I finally convinced myself that I am gay. Even if I do get married I won't be able to have sex with my wife... I have come to the conclusion to end my life once and for all."

This young man's sense of shame around his sexuality was so great that he wrote *"I want to keep my suicide a mystery... I don't want to leave any clues behind. Only [I] will know why I did it, everyone else will think the pressure of school got to me."*

As well as creating a culture of stigma and intolerance, our society encourages suicide as an option for lesbians and gay men through the frequent portrayal of homosexuals as being inherently self-destructive. We have created an image of the unhappy homosexual in literature and the media for whom suicide is the only resolution.

Lesbian and gay characters in novels and films frequently kill themselves in the end, and this negative myth has been perpetuated by the absence of positive gay role models living

happy, fulfilled and emotionally well-adjusted lives.

The following account describes one young person's experience of the legitimisation of suicide:

"When I was a teenager in high school (heck, all the time I was growing up) I longed for someone to help me. To help me learn to fit in. To help me acknowledge myself and not be afraid of myself. I longed for that so much, yet never received it.

Finally, out of desperation, I tried something I had learned about. Suicide. It's everywhere. The television, news, radio, papers etc. Isn't it sad, I couldn't find the information or support to help me come in contact with who I was, but I could find the information to end my life?"

Where to from here?

If we are to take the health and livelihood of our young people seriously, then suicide is one of the most serious matters affecting them today. For young lesbian, gay and bisexual people, suicide is seen as a viable option in an unfriendly world. Overseas studies suggest that it is likely to be extensive, but until we have some Australian research the problem can continue to be swept under the carpet here.

As well as research, there are crucial steps that health, welfare and education systems should be taking now to address homophobic attitudes and behaviour. We need to support education and training programs such as *Block Out*, which is described on the following page.

We also need to promote a positive image of sexuality, including homosexuality and bisexuality, and provide young people with accurate information on these subjects. Until this happens, for most young bisexuals, gays and lesbians, the years of adolescence will continue to be an avoidable nightmare.

• Edited from articles by Kenton Penley Miller.

"Please don't let this happen again."

"When the clergy condemns a homosexual person to hell and eternal damnation, we the congregation echo 'Amen'. When the clergy says a homosexual person is sick, perverted and a danger to our children, we again echo 'Amen'. I deeply regret my lack of knowledge concerning gay and lesbian people.

Had I allowed myself to investigate what I now see as bible bigotry and diabolical dehumanising slander against our fellow human beings, I would not be looking back with regret for having relinquished my ability to think and reason with other people... people I trusted for truth and guidance in my life and in the life of our gay son.

God did not heal or cure Bobby as he, our family, and clergy believed he should. It is obvious to me now why he did not. God has never been encumbered by his child's genetically determined sexual orientation. God is pleased that Bobby had a kind and loving heart. In God's eyes, kindness and love are what life is about.

I did not know that each time I echoed 'Amen' to the eternal damnation, referring to Bobby as sick, perverted and a danger to our children that his self-esteem and personal worth were being destroyed. Finally his spirit broke beyond repair, he could no longer rise above the injustice of it all. Bobby ended his life at age twenty.

It was not God's will that Bobby jumped over the side of a freeway overpass into the path of an eighteen-wheel truck, killing him instantly. Bobby's death was the direct result of his parent's ignorance and fear of the word 'gay'.

An injustice has been done, not only to Bobby but to his family as well. God knows it isn't right that Bobby is not here with his loved ones. Correct education about homosexuality would have prevented this tragedy.

There are no words to express the pain and emptiness remaining in the hearts of Bobby's family members, relatives and friends. We miss his kind and gentle ways, his fun-loving spirit, his laughter. Bobby's hopes and dreams should not have been taken from him, but they were. We can't have Bobby back. Please don't let this happen again."

• Testimony presented at a public hearing on PROJECT 10, June 23, 1988, by Mary A. Griffith, mother of Bobby Griffith.

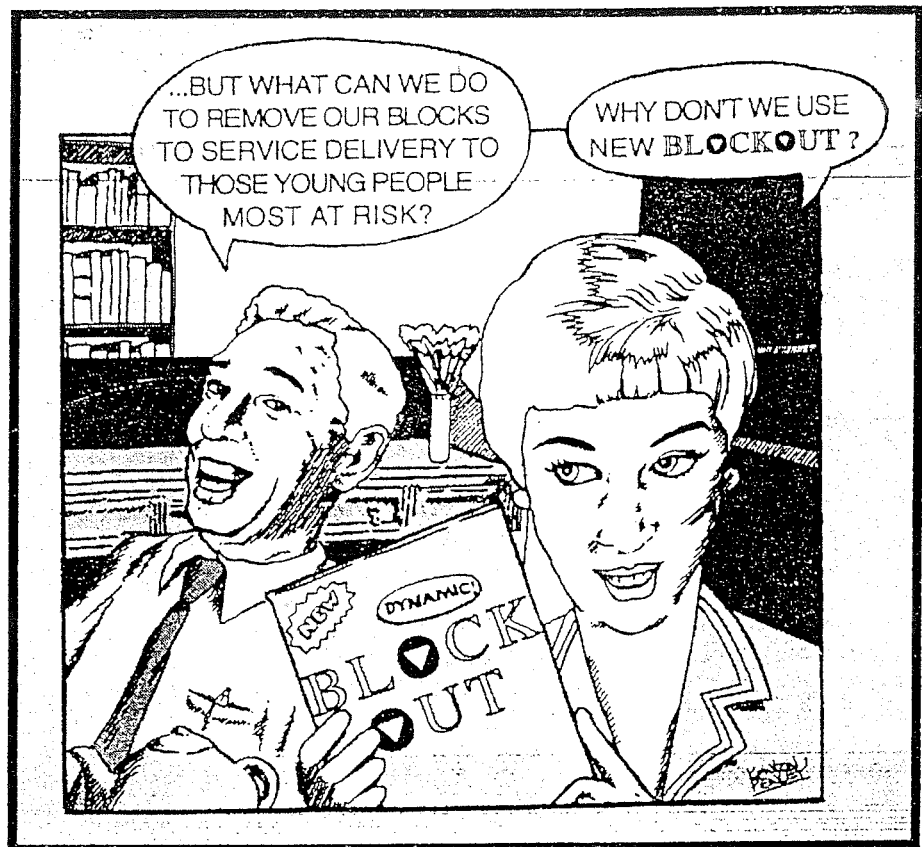
Useful Resources

Recommended reading for practitioners working with gay and lesbian issues:

- *The New Loving Someone Gay*, Don Clark, Celestial Arts, California.
- *Lesbian and Gay Lifestyles, a Guide for Counselling and Education*, Natalie Jane Woodman, Ed. Irvington Publishers, New York.
- *Keys to Caring, Assisting your Gay and Lesbian Clients*, Robert J. Kus, Alyson Publications, Boston.
- *Invisible Families, a Resource for Family and Friends of Lesbian or Gay Daughters and Sons*, Terry Stewart, New Women's Press Ltd., New Zealand.
- Current issues relating to lesbians and gays are explored in a newsletter published from the Australian Centre for Gay and Lesbian Research, Room 314, Building 127, University of Sydney, NSW 2006. Subscriptions available.

Resources in South Australia for gays and lesbians:

- *Gayline* telephone counselling - (08) 362 3223
- *Lesbian Line* phone counselling - (08) 223 1982 (Fri pm only)
- *Country Line*, Box 312 Kapunda, SA 5373. (085) 28 5282
- *PFlag* - (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, Annie - (088) 377 108, Pam - (08) 240 0616
- *Second Story Youth Health Centre* - (08) 232 0233 (peer educational programs for under 26 year olds.)
- *Bfriend*, Adelaide Central Mission - (08) 212 2599



Block Out - a chance to challenge homophobia

A number of attempts have been made around Australia to address the disastrous effects of discrimination driven by homophobia. One of these is *Block Out - Challenging Homophobia* - a two day train-the-trainer program focusing on homophobia and the profound effect it has on gay, lesbian and bisexual students.

The project was developed in South Australia with funding from the Commonwealth AIDS Workforce Information Standards and Exchange Program (CAWISE). Its workshop format uses creative adult learning techniques, and includes segments defining homophobia, exercises about a scale of homophobic attitudes, origins of homophobia, myth-busting about homosexuality, examination of blocks to personal, structural and cultural homophobia and the development of strategies to overcome these.

For many mainstream service providers, *Block Out* provides a rare opportunity to ask the questions they have always wanted to ask about gay lifestyles and to exchange thoughts and feelings in a climate where they feel safe. The many 'straight' teachers, school counsellors, community service workers and health and welfare personnel who have participated in this program have responded so positively.

It is heartening to see that 'straights' do care and are prepared to stick their necks out so that gay, lesbian and bisexual young people get a better deal, and at least have someone to talk to who understands.

Block Out continues to be offered by the Youth Sector Training Council, so if you want to find out more about this program, please contact the Youth Sector Training Council, tel: (08) 212 1735.

Bfriend

By and large, the Churches and their agencies are hardly renowned for a progressive stance against homophobia. Orthodox Christianity holds homosexuality to be a sin, and only those who refrain from the practice can be welcomed to the fold.

In Adelaide in recent months we have seen heated dissension over the employment of a gay man as a researcher in the Uniting Church's central office. It is in this climate that the Adelaide Central Mission has funded a rare service to assist gay men and lesbians in the 'coming out' process.

Mahamati, one of the project's workers, describes this step in challenging heterosexual dominance.

On the basis of past experiences which gay and lesbian people have often found negative, one could be forgiven for being surprised that the Church, or at least one section of it, has taken on an advocacy role for homosexual people. Last year, in the International Year of the Family, the Adelaide Central Mission recognised that this group of people, especially those newly identifying and coming to terms with their choice of sexual expression, has very limited mainstream support.

Consequently, a submission prepared by Counselling Services staff was approved by the Board to fund a twelve-month programme to initiate and implement a 'buddy' type system for lesbian and gay people of all ages who are in the process of 'coming out', to themselves and to others.

Named *Bfriend*, the project commenced in late January and the project co-ordinators are Henry Von Doussa and Mahamati. *Bfriend* aims to ease the process of coming out, which is often a stressful and painful experience for many gays and lesbians. Often too, people present for counselling or therapy and, while this can certainly be helpful, what is sometimes needed more is a social network and resources. Many heterosexual counsellors are unaware of these resources and of limited help in linking people with the most useful organisations for their lesbian and gay clients.

Bfriend will operate by recruiting people willing to act as a support to others in a negotiated way. This may be by telephone calls, by writing to someone in the country, by including them in a social network, accompanying them to events, provision of resources and the like. Orientation and training will be provided for the people giving this support.

Newly identifying gays and lesbians can expect to receive a Bfriending relationship, which is non-exploitative emotion-

ally, sexually and financially, and a service which will take great care about confidentiality. People will be matched according to requests and availability, and there will also be workshops on relevant issues such as coming out, relationships and safer sex available to attend.

Families of people coming out also experience difficulty in coming to terms with this new information. Very often the person coming out has spent a lot of time, sometimes years, thinking about the issue and deciding if he/she is sure before making any announcement.

Nervousness and anxiety about telling families can mean that this news can drop like a bombshell and leave the family in disarray. To assist the process of assimilating this information, families willing to *Bfriend* others will also take part in the project. It will not be necessary for all members of the family to be involved - parents may be *Bfriend*ed whether their son or daughter is in the program or not.

It is hoped that in this way newly identifying lesbian and gay people will find peer support. Sometimes people coming out experience rejection from family and

friends, discrimination in the workplace and social networks and find it hard to meet others of the same sexual orientation.

The most visible ways of achieving this have been gay bars, and the experience of attending one alone can be very intimidating. Often to boost courage and confidence alcohol and other drug use is increased, and this can lead to some very unsafe emotional, physical and sexual situations.

It is important to realise that the rate of youth suicide in gay and lesbian young people is up to three times higher than that of heterosexual youth - already alarmingly high in Australia. Homophobia and the pressures of trying to fit into a heterosexual dominant society when one is gay or lesbian are a definite mental and physical health hazard.

The support and care offered by *BFriend* can help make this a safer and more secure process which is less stressful and less traumatic.

If you have clients, who might benefit from contact with *Bfriend*, know of people willing to be one of the *Bfriend*ers, or are simply interested in finding out more about the project, please contact Mahamati or Henry on (08) 233 6812.



Flying Fish/Inglewood

Gay and lesbian activists in Tasmania

Tasmania's anti-gay laws have received much media attention over the last couple of years. In April 1994 the United Nations Human Rights Committee ruled that these laws violate human rights, a historic precedent with global implications which was met with enthusiasm by gay men and lesbians the world over.

The people responsible for this notable victory are the Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights Group, or TGLRG, a group with a heavy-duty acronym and the courage, vision and political know-how to get as far as the imposing portals of Geneva.

Rodney Croome and **Lavinia Savell** are both high-profile TGLRG activists. Despite their emphasis on law reform, they see the battle against homophobia as much greater than just a legal one.

In the following interview they spoke to **Jason Rostant** about the impact of the anti-gay laws on themselves and their community, and the joys and frustrations of an activist life.



photo by Roger Lovell

Left to right: Rodney Croome, Miranda Morris, Nick Toonen and Lavinia Savell celebrate victory (the United Nations Human Rights Committee's ruling against the Tasmanian laws).

Jason: What effect do the anti-gay laws have on lesbians and gay men in Tasmania?

Rodney: We want these laws repealed because they have such a draconian effect. They are generally seen as anti-gay laws, although they criminalise some heterosexual activity. That means they attach a criminal stigma to individual gay men and lesbians. Even though the laws don't specifically criminalise lesbian sex people often don't make that distinction, and use the laws to

justify discrimination against lesbians as well as gay men.

We have case studies of people who have faced discrimination in employment and housing, and bashing on the street. Again and again we see that the criminal status which gay men have, and lesbians are thought to have, is an excuse in the mind of the discriminating or violent person to treat us badly. People think that "well, these people are criminals, and they're worthy of no better treatment".

Even the government does this. It has particularly homophobic policies in areas such as schools and the legal system, and it justifies these policies by saying homosexual acts are against the law.

The laws haven't been enforced against gay men for about 10 years, but there's always the possibility they could sometime in the future. So as well as the criminal stigma there's always the possibility of gay men ending up in jail, although it's fairly remote at the moment.

Jason: You're both public figures in Tasmania and easily recognised as members of TGLRG. How does this affect your lives?

Lavinia: Being very visible sometimes it makes it easier, but it also makes it harder at times. For example, my family has had problems with me being so open and public about what I do. There are also some shops that I just won't go into because they've been really homophobic to me when I've been in there before. And I've had people be quite abusive on the street towards me.

But it's also positive. I've had people come up to me and say

What do the anti-gay laws actually say?

The Tasmanian laws (sections 122 and 123) outlaw:

- all forms of sexual contact between men, and
- sexual intercourse which is "against the order of nature". This is interpreted to mean anal intercourse, and possibly oral intercourse, between heterosexuals, and arguably could include lesbians

You lose some important things, like contact with your parents... but you gain a whole lot of other things

things like, "I think you did a great job, I'm really pleased you're being public, because I can't and it's good that someone else can."

Rodney: There are some problems in being recognised, but I generally get good feedback from people, and the people who are abusive are perhaps a bit intimidated by the public profile. In some ways having a public profile protects me from a lot of the problems that are faced by other gay men and lesbians in Tasmania.

But the general climate of fear and repression, which the law cultivates, affects us in myriad ways throughout our daily life.

Jason: Is there a toll on your personal life from your activist work?

Lavinia: I actually feel much more alive and much more excited. I've got a focus to my life. There is a toll, but you have to balance it. You lose some important things, like contact with your parents... but you gain a whole lot of other things. I think it's the most exciting and wonderful thing that any gay man or lesbian could do.

Rodney: I agree. The benefits are just astounding. I've learned so much that I couldn't have otherwise, about myself and about other people, and about the way the world works. And I've gained so many insights into human potential - potential for bad, for doing such awful things to each other, and potential for doing such wonderful things for ourselves and each other and the world.

My sister doesn't talk to me any more. That's a great cost. And of course the word cost invokes thoughts of money... If I wasn't doing this I would probably be earning a lot more! But that doesn't worry me much at all. I just can't compare the benefits of being in a 9 to 5 job and earning money with the benefits of being at one and the same time on the outside and the centre of

Tasmanian life. Because that's where we are. Our issues, if you like, are both at the fringe and at the centre of Tasmanian politics. Having that dual position, you see so much that other people can't see.

Lavinia: It has given me a great deal of freedom, because I'm no longer constrained by what I should and shouldn't do, by what I should and shouldn't say, by what I should

and shouldn't wear. All those social conventions and social boundaries. Once you're out and you're really public about it, you have the freedom to do things because they're right, and you know they need to be done. Being out and being public about it also means people can't pretend you're something which you're not. They just can't.

A potted history of the struggle for gay law reform in Tasmania

- Late '70s First attempts to get the laws repealed by the then Tasmanian Homosexual Law Reform Group. There was a **parliamentary inquiry** which recommended repeal of the laws, plus a push from the community, but parliament didn't respond.
- The '80s Various calls for repeal of laws, particularly after the advent of AIDS, but the struggle didn't really get going until
- 1988 Lesbian and gay community in Tasmania becoming more 'out'. **Tasmanian Gay Law Reform Group formed** (later became the Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights Group) and began campaigning quietly, then became more visible and defiant.
- Sept '88 **The Gay Law Reform Group set up a stall at the Salamanca Market** which Hobart City Council banned because it didn't want people to talk about illegal activities in its 'family' market. The Gay Law Reform Group defied the ban and the council brought the police in. 130 people were arrested for trespass (in a public market!) over a 7 week period. Eventually the group won the right to have the stall - a major victory.
- May '89 **The Labour/Green government was elected.** A series of anti-gay rallies around the state protested the possibility of gay law reform.
- 1991 **Gay law reform passed by the Lower House**, then was **blocked by the Upper House** in a very unpleasant debate (some members called for the reintroduction of the death penalty for homosexuality). Meanwhile the gay and lesbian community kept actively campaigning. Numerous pro-gay and lesbian rallies, public meetings and a lot of community education happened. Tasmanians were increasingly in support of reform.
- Dec '91 **TGLRG took a complaint to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC)** which said that the laws in Tasmania violated Article 17, the right to privacy and Article 26, the right to equality before the law in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Australia is a signatory. The complaint took 2 years to hear, meanwhile there was lots of heated and acrimonious debate in Tasmania.
- April '94 **UNHRC ruled that the laws do in fact breach human rights standards** - a major step forward. The Federal Government introduced the **Human Rights Sexual Conduct Bill** (or Privacy Bill)
- Dec '94 **Sexual Privacy Bill was passed**, with the coalition's support - another major step forward. The bill inspired huge nationwide debate, and last year there was also the **boycott of Tasmanian produce** in Sydney and Melbourne. Unfortunately the Federal Government's Sexual Privacy Bill doesn't override Tasmania's anti-gay laws. It entrenches the right to privacy, but doesn't define in what circumstances that right should apply.
- Next step **TGLRG is appealing to the High Court** to get a finding that Tasmania's laws are invalidated by the new Sexual Privacy Bill.

Rodney: I used to get so angry when people assumed I was heterosexual. Not that it's necessarily bad to be heterosexual, but because I wasn't. People don't do that any more!

People look at me and think I'm the representative Gay Man. They might not know any other gay men, but they recognise me. I feel a certain restraint because I don't want to give them a bad impression of gay men. Even though it's wrong for them to think I represent all gay men, there's still a bit of pressure there.

Jason: So are these the things that motivate you to keep going? The struggle of the last six years in particular has taken a lot of work to get where it is now, and often it must have felt like bashing your heads against brick walls...

Lavinia: I think that if at the very beginning the government had said, "Look, we're really sorry, we'll change this instantly" then we wouldn't have made the other changes that we have. Gay law reform isn't the only thing we've been doing. It provides a focus, and from there we've gone on to do all sorts of things. It's enabled us to generate a great deal of pride in our community.

Rodney: I don't really get discouraged. I get tired, but I don't get discouraged, because our battles for gay law reform are as much about changing community attitudes as they are about changing the law.

Although the law hasn't changed yet, community attitudes certainly have changed, which is probably a more important thing.

And although the law hasn't changed yet, community attitudes certainly have changed, which is probably a more important thing.

We can see this in opinion polls which show that support for lesbian and gay rights and other lesbian and gay issues has gone right up. That's very encouraging. So the more I do this work, the more inspired I am to continue it.

Lavinia: I don't know how anybody can be an out gay man or lesbian and not want to change things. I think that's what keeps me going. I just have a belief that I can change things, and that I have a right to equality with everyone else. I'm *not* a second class citizen, and I refuse to be treated as one.

I get very tired, because it takes a lot of energy to push your head against this brick wall. But it's also incredibly rewarding. It's really good when your community recognises what you're doing.

Jason: Where does the support come from when you come out, or get into this kind of activism? Have you had support from straight people?

Lavinia: When I first came out, my support came from a small group of gay men and lesbians who had been out for a while. They gave me space and also support to find myself.

But there is an important role for counsellors too. It's really difficult to go to close friends or family, because you are aware of how much you could lose if you come out to them and they reject you. So you may choose to talk to someone who's a bit removed from the situation, like a social worker, therapist or counsellor.

I think straight people can help. But they need to be aware of their limitations. There are things they never ever will experience, things they'll never understand about being gay or lesbian. They can be useful, but they also need to

I don't know how anybody can be an out gay man or lesbian and not want to change things.

have a lesbian and gay network that they have confidence in to refer coming out lesbian and gay clients to.

Rodney: The first person I came out to was a straight counsellor at university. That was a terrible experience. It was a very big thing for me to talk to someone about being gay for the first time.

I imagine this counsellor thought he was being a tolerant, small 'l' liberal. He kept saying, "There's no need to talk about this, it's fine that you're gay, it's not an issue." But I wanted so much to talk to someone. He just didn't understand the importance of me trying to integrate this into my life after such a long time of denying it.

He sent me to another straight counsellor in the psychology department. She sent me to an older gay man. That was better than the straight counsellor, but he was still fairly unpolitical. He sent me to a younger gay man, who was quite political, and that was a much more conducive environment for me.

But it was the kind of process I didn't need to go through. I think it's not unfair to expect the counsellors that I saw to have been more aware of my needs as a gay man, and a budding activist. They were quite unaware of those needs.

The support that I got coming out and beginning my activist career came from a small number of gay men and lesbians who shared my views and aspirations.

I got very little support from my straight friends, and not that much support from the wider gay and lesbian community, people who were mostly happy with the way things were, or at least they hid their discontent.

Jason: What do you think restricts the ability of

counsellors and social workers to adequately deal with the issues that are confronting them when a lesbian or gay man walks in to see them? How could their service be improved?

Rodney: It's not good enough for any counsellor to simply have a small 'l' liberal, tolerant attitude - "Oh, it's OK, you're gay, or lesbian, and that's that." It's very easy for straight counsellors to ignore the profundity and complexity of the way homophobia and heterosexism affect our lives, and ignore the many issues that confront us differently from straight people.

Our world is a different world, and the issues we face are different and need a different approach. We can't just rely on lesbian and gay counsellors either. We need to rely on heterosexuals, and we need them to understand this. That requires a lot of training and consciousness-raising about the needs of gay men and lesbians, especially young gays and lesbians.

The problem of 'tolerance' is more subtle and no less dangerous than that of counsellors who are actively homophobic, although these are obviously a big problem too.

There is also institutionalised homophobia. I think that workers in welfare organisations with a religious base may find that even though they are not homophobic themselves, they are part of an institution with anti-gay and lesbian policies. It could also be an institution run by a homophobic state government.

In these situations there's little an individual can do, but together a bunch of people meeting together, say through a union, could positively affect such chauvinistic policies.

It's very important that people *do* challenge policies like this through organised activity, because they can have a disastrous effect on the staff and clients. And in a homophobic climate it's much easier for heterosexuals to stick their necks out and do this.

Lavinia: A big problem is that we're still not far enough away from the old idea that homosexuality is a certifiable psychiatric condition or disease. There's still not enough information in the community about lesbians and gay men.

There are still too many counsellors around who need to understand that it's not a matter of counselling people out of it, but supporting people to find out who they are. You can't change people, and if you don't feel able to deal with it, if you can't listen to what they're saying, then you should refer them on to someone who can.

Jason: So what role do you see for educational institutions?

Lavinia: It's vital that counsellors actually *discuss* these issues as part of their training. The most important thing is to get lesbians and gay men into the classroom, to talk about their lives, what it was like coming out, the support they did or didn't get, what it's like now.

This contact is so important. It's the best way to start breaking down the barriers between people, getting them to talk, ask questions, realise that we're not undesirable or certifiable! Obviously you can't get rid of homophobia overnight. If you begin to have some positive experiences and realise we're not ogres, that's a good first step.

Rodney: I agree that's the most important thing to do.

Find the lesbians and gay men in your life - because they're there!

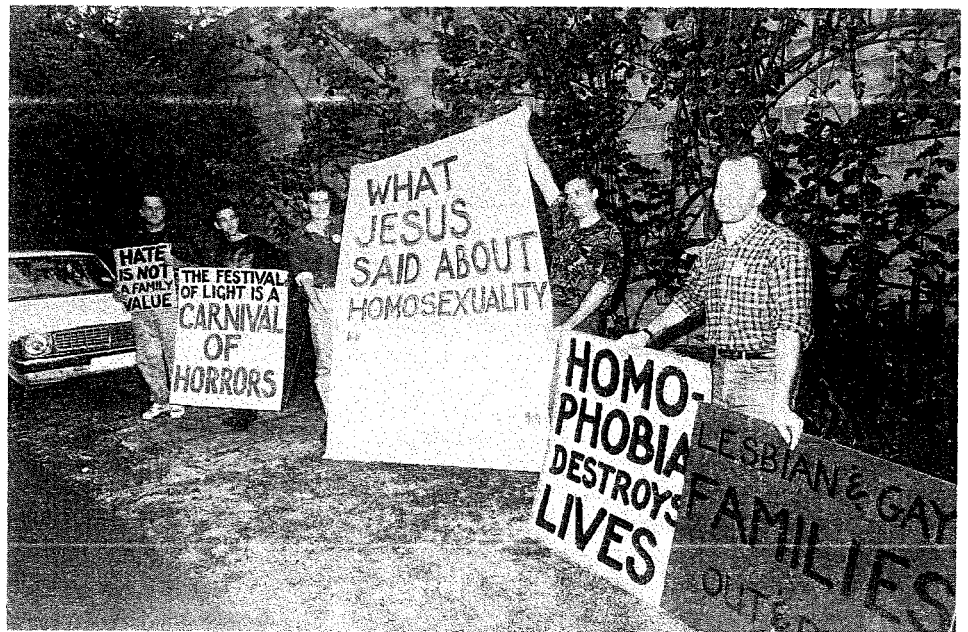


photo by Roger Lovell

A Tasmanian protest against the visit of an anti-gay preacher brought to Australia by the Festival of Life to coincide with Mardi Gras in February 1994. Left to right are Peter Lamour, Jason Rostant, Rodney Croombe, Nick Toonen and Richard Hale.

A secondary thing is to have a mandatory item in the curriculum, such as a research project where students have to go off and investigate an issue related to the lives of lesbians and gay men. A rights issue or a mental health or youth or discrimination issue. There's plenty of material from overseas, from the U.S. or Britain. There's not so much Australian material unfortunately. The only way we can generate the research material we need in Australia is to interest people in these issues, and that interest comes from having items on the curriculum.

Jason: Tasmania is seen as a very homophobic place, both institutionally and in its general population - to what extent do you think is this a true representation?

Rodney: I don't think it is at all. The opinion polls show that support for lesbian and gay rights has increased dramatically in the last few years to a position where more

people in Hobart support decriminalisation of consenting sex between homosexuals in private than they do in Melbourne!

The problem is that the people on the mainland fail to distinguish between the Tasmanian population, which is on the whole fairly tolerant, and the institutions. For example, the Upper House, which supposedly represents these people, is actually not all that accountable and reflects an old-style, reactionary politics.

It's also a problem of the mainland media portraying Tasmania as backward, although this is not necessarily the case, because it allows mainland audiences to feel more enlightened about themselves in comparison.

The same applies to Aboriginal and environmental issues. Tasmania is portrayed as an awful place to live if you're in a minority group, and an environmental hell-hole.

Jason: To wrap up, in what ways could people reading this support the Tasmanian struggle, and the advancement of lesbian and gay rights generally?

Rodney: In terms of Tasmania, obviously it's important that we do have support from around the country. If people feel strongly, they can write letters to the Tasmanian government letting them know that people on the mainland are angry about what's happening in Tasmania. And to their own newspapers saying that the Tasmanian situation is a national issue, we should all be concerned about it.

But it probably is more important for people to work locally. My advice would be to find out about issues confronting the local lesbian and gay community. These are things that straight people should be aware of, and prepared at any time to be allies for.

Lavinia: Get up and talk to people. Find the lesbians and gay men in your life - because they're there!

And start to look at yourself in terms of your own homophobia and heterosexism, because we've all got it, no matter how liberated and tolerant we think we are.

I think that's the most important thing - to talk to people and confront your own prejudices.

Lesbian and gay rights are human rights

Lesbians and gay men are subject to widespread persecution and discrimination throughout the world, solely on the basis of their sexuality. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and that Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this declaration, without distinction of any kind.* Persecution and discrimination are abuses of universal human rights.

Human rights abuses against lesbians and gay men, although less severe in Australia than some other parts of the world, are nevertheless real and serious. They cover a wide range of areas from discriminatory legislation to personal violence, even murder.

Although it is generally accepted that around 10% of Australia's population are lesbian or gay, our continuing invisibility at many levels of society is a testament to the discrimination which exists nationally. Fear of persecution or personal ruin ensures that the vast majority of lesbians and gay men not only do not complain, but in fact remain totally silent about their sexual orientation.

While the picture for lesbians and gay men varies from state to state, nowhere in Australia is there total equity. Five states and territories offer varying degrees of legal protection from discrimination, but usually with exemptions for such bodies as private schools.

Tasmania remains the only State where (male) homosexuality is totally illegal. However, the age of consent for gay men is, in almost every State, higher than that for heterosexuals. Our relationships carry no status throughout Australia, except for the purpose of immigration. Same-sex couples are denied the right to jointly adopt children and lesbians are refused access to reproductive technology. Everywhere, lesbians and gay men are targets for homophobic violence.

It must be acknowledged that certain inequities have already been redressed by the Federal Government, such as the removal of the ban on the employment of gays and lesbians within the Defence Forces, and the progressive stand taken with regard to sanctioning immigration on the basis of a lesbian or gay relationship.

Nevertheless, much more remains to be done in order to ensure that all Australians, regardless of sexual orientation, enjoy the full rights and benefits of Australian residency and citizenship. The time has come for the Government to take the initiative and adopt a coordinated strategy aimed at ending discrimination across the board.

From *1.7 million Australians - An Agenda for Change for Lesbians and Gays* by the Australian Council for Lesbian and Gay Rights, NSW Secretariat, PO Box 1178, Darlinghurst, NSW 2010.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Discrimination and the Law

The lesbian and gay community is a diverse one. Lesbians and gays exist in all socio-economic groupings, in indigenous and all ethnic cultures, in all age groups and amongst all professions.

We share in all the concerns of the Australian people, therefore a specific lesbian and/or gay perspective should be recognised as existing in all portfolios and policy areas, including industrial relations, women's issues, education, disability and aging.

Discrimination in the workplace

Federal legislation which outlaws discrimination in the workplace only extends to hiring and promotions practices. Spouse benefits provided by the employer, such as discounted travel or relocation expenses for the employee's partner, are not covered.

The Federal Government should extend the provisions of the Industrial Relations Act to cover discrimination in all aspects of employment.

Discrimination in other areas

There remain three Australian states (Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia) which have no legislation to protect lesbians and gays from discrimination. While freedom from discrimination in the workplace is protected by federal legislation, there is no legal recourse for lesbians and gays in other areas, such as housing, education and the provision of goods and services.

The Federal Government, in line with its international obligations, should enact legislation outlawing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in all areas of life.

Discrimination in the military

Although the Government's overturning of the ban on lesbians and gays being employed in the Defence Forces was a welcome act, harassment and discrimination in conditions of employment within the military is widespread and continuing. Discrimination against those with HIV/AIDS is also of great concern.

Decriminalisation of homosexuality and the age of consent

Throughout Australia discrimination exists through the age of consent for gay men, which is different from the age of consent for heterosexuals, and also varies from state to state. In Tasmania, sex between gay men is still illegal. The Tasmanian Government's refusal to acknowledge Australia's international obligations in the light of the United Nations Human Rights Committee's decision underlines the need for the Federal Government to use its external affairs powers to overturn the Tasmanian legislation.

The Federal Government should also legislate to introduce a uniform age of consent between persons of the same gender throughout Australia, equal to that of heterosexuals.

Superannuation

The Federal Government has pressed for compulsory superannuation of all Australian workers. Unfortunately, many lesbians and gay men do not receive the same benefits from these compulsory savings as their

heterosexual workmates. Some superannuation schemes do not recognise same-sex relationships, while they readily make payouts to the partners of deceased heterosexual contributors. (Prime offenders in this regard are the old NSW Public Service Scheme and the Commonwealth Superannuation Scheme for Australian Public Servants).

This contradicts the requirements of non-discrimination on the grounds of sexuality in the Commonwealth Public Service Act, and on the grounds of sexual preference in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Act 1986.

Furthermore, current taxation practices mean that superannuation benefits passing from a deceased heterosexual spouse to spouse or dependents are not taxed, while those passing to a same-sex partner are taxed.

Life insurance

Life insurance companies continue to deny life insurance coverage to gay men - on the basis that they are gay men. The rationale for this appears to be the perceived risk of a gay man contracting HIV/AIDS. Insurance companies require information about the sexual activities of gay men which is not sought from heterosexual applicants. Besides being discriminatory, these practices are illogical.

Federal legislation prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in the provision of services would be an effective weapon against discrimination in the areas of insurance and superannuation.

Relationship recognition

Despite the fact that Australia is one of only six countries in the world which recognises lesbian and gay relationships for the purpose of immigration, in no other legislation in Australia do our relationships have any status whatsoever.

Our partners, therefore, are not recognised as our next of kin, denying them the rights of heterosexual spouses, such as automatic hospital visiting rights, inheritance of property in the event of intestate death and custody of the partner's children. As couples and families, we commonly face discrimination in the provision of life and medical insurance.

Parenting

Lesbian and gay couples are not allowed to jointly adopt children, since we are defined for the purposes of adoption, as in almost every area of life, as single people. We are also prevented, in practice, in some Australian states from fostering children. Lesbians are denied access to reproduction technology such as donor insemination.

Although the Family Court does not now disqualify a lesbian or gay parent *per se* from being awarded custody, the parent's sexuality may still be taken into account along with other factors when assessing the suitability of a parent to fulfil 'the best interests of the child'.

While acknowledging that suitability must be established, the NSW Law Reform Commission found in its inquiry into adoption practices that children raised by lesbian or gay parents suffer no disadvantages over those raised by heterosexual parents. Sexual orientation ought not, therefore, be a consideration in determining suitability.

Anti-lesbian and gay violence

One of the most serious problems facing the lesbian and gay community today is that of violence against lesbians and gay men. Over the past three years, surveys conducted in the lesbian and gay community show that 10-20% of lesbians and gay men report that they are survivors of physical violence and that 60-70% of lesbians and gay men report incidents of verbal harassment and abuse.

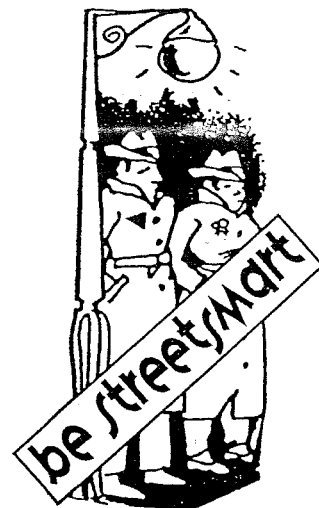
What the surveys fail to show is that physical violence at times leads to murder. At least 16 murders have taken place in the last four years in NSW alone, where the clear motive has been homophobia-related hate.

The majority of violent assaults against gay men are committed by strangers, mostly gangs of young men in their twenties, in public streets. Lesbians are also subject to street attacks, but the overall pattern of violence and harassment links it more closely to violence against all women. The attacker is often older, and the incident is likely to be part of ongoing incidents in the woman's neighbourhood or workplace.

The studies are mainly limited to the inner city suburbs of capital cities. Very little is known about patterns and effects of homophobic violence in rural areas.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the violence is the propensity of the police and courts to indulge in victim-blaming. In states where police departments have set up liaison with the lesbian and gay community, this has been somewhat reduced.

In some cases, the character or habits of the person attacked has become the focus of the case, rather than the assault or



the assailants. In several recent murder trials, the defence has rested on an unprovable assertion that the attack was in response to an unwanted sexual advance by the dead man. Juries have taken the view that killing is an acceptable response to the 'threat' of a sexual approach. This contrasts sharply with the generally hostile view of women who kill violent husbands, often after years of physical and emotional abuse.

A successful community response

Lesbians and gay men are fighting back. The *Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project* in New South Wales is one example of community action dedicated to eliminating hate-based violence against lesbians and gay men.

Through education campaigns, seminars, workshops and self-defence programs, the project raises awareness of the problem and strategies for dealing with it, both in the lesbian and gay communities and the wider communities.

It aims to help lesbians and gay men deal with acts of violence against them and support survivors of violence, as well as monitoring and publicising the levels of violence that exist.

• For more information, contact *The Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project*, PO Box 1178, Darlinghurst, NSW 2010. Tel: (02) 360 6687, (008) 637 360. Fax: (02) 380 5848

LESBIANS

YOUR HEALTH MATTERS



IF YOU NEED TO FIND OUT ABOUT:

▼ HEALTH INFORMATION ▼ COUNSELLING ▼ LESBIAN FRIENDLY SERVICES ▼

CONTACT:

The Women's Healthline 9-5 Monday to Friday
on (08) 267 5366 or toll free 1800 182 098.
A Confidential Telephone Service provided by
ADELAIDE WOMEN'S COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRE
64 Pennington Terrace, North Adelaide 5006

For more information about obtaining this poster, please contact *Bernadette Roberts*, Adelaide Women's Health Centre, 64 Pennington Terrace, North Adelaide, SA 5006. Tel: (08) 267 5366.