



Compulsory Heterosexuality

by Stephanie R. Olson

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Compulsory heterosexuality is the assumption that women and men are innately attracted to each other emotionally and sexually and that heterosexuality is normal and universal. This institutionalization of heterosexuality in our society leads to an institutionalized inequality of power not only between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals, but also between men and women, with far reaching consequences.

Under a regime of compulsory heterosexuality, men control all aspects of women's lives, including their sexuality, childbirth and rearing activities, safety, physical movement, labor, and access to knowledge. Compulsory heterosexuality leads to discrimination against homosexuals and the intolerance and/or invisibility of gay men and lesbians in society.

Moreover, compulsory heterosexuality routinely punishes those who do not conform to heterosexuality. Thus, same-sex relationships are made taboo and, often, criminalized, while pressure is placed on people to form heterosexual relationships and bonds. The need to enforce male-female relationships as a social norm suggests that heterosexuality may be less an innate response and more of a social conditioning.

Poet Adrienne Rich introduced the concept of compulsory heterosexuality in her writings, most notably in her 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Rich was one of the first public intellectuals to challenge the idea that heterosexuality is the natural expression of human sexuality and that other forms of sexuality are deviant.

Rich argues that heterosexuality, rather than being natural or innate, is an institution designed to perpetuate male social and economic privilege. Rich contends that since the first erotic bond is to the mother and that this primary bond is what is natural, it follows that woman-identification is a more "natural" state of being than heterosexuality.

A post-modern critique of Rich's description of compulsory heterosexuality questions its assumption that it is possible for any identity to exist naturally. Another critique is that Rich places too much emphasis on woman-identification as the basis for lesbian activity and almost ignores sexuality. In her essay, sexuality is seen as masculine and not a part of woman-identification, thus perpetuating the idea that women are not naturally sexual.

Gayle Rubin argues that although the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality is a powerful force in the social construction of lesbianism as "deviant," the feminist insistence on regulated sexuality even between women is equally powerful and also oppressive.

According to Rubin, Rich and other anti-sex feminists redefine lesbian sexuality within feminist terms, rather than challenging the entire notion of "sexual correctness." This, in turn, creates a form of social control within the feminist movement, using the fear of "unfeminist" or "oppressive" sexuality to construct a normative "feminist" sexuality with all other forms as deviant. Rubin believes that this type of lesbian-feminism continues to regulate women's sexuality and thus works against the feminist goal of liberating

women from all forms of oppression.

However, while the idea of compulsory heterosexuality has critics in both conservative and academic circles, the concept has been accepted and embraced in many college classes and by human rights activists. As one example of its scope, the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women, held in Brussels, March 4-8, 1976, named compulsory heterosexuality (in the form of discrimination against and persecution of lesbians) as a "crime against women."

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Stephanie R. Olson is a Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers University. Her research interests include race, gender, and social justice issues. Her dissertation examines the political implications of women's self-defense. She is a co-founder of the Empower Program, a violence prevention non-profit organization in Washington, D. C. Olson is currently living in Belgrade, Serbia with her husband, a Foreign Service Officer, and their son Nicolas.