

HOMOPHOBIA

Co-authored with Barbara Zoloth, published by *The Campaign to End Homophobia*, 1990

"Homophobia: The fear of feelings of love for members of one's own sex and therefore the hatred of those feelings in others... the belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance."

(Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider. Freedom, California: The Crossing Press, 1984.)

For too long, erotic and sexual contact between women, and between men, has been thought of as a major social problem. But the problem is not homosexuality. The real issue is homophobia -- the many ways in which people are oppressed on the basis of sexual orientation and affectional preference.

In many cultures, same-sex eroticism is socially accepted as part of the normal range of human behavior. But in our society, many people believe that sexual contact between men is sick and immoral, and that sexual contact between women is sick, immoral, and either non-existent or impossible.

This article answers the following questions about homophobia:

How do you recognize homophobia in yourself and others?

How does homophobia hurt heterosexuals?

What are the causes of homophobia?

Can homophobia be cured?

HOW DO YOU RECOGNIZE HOMOPHOBIA IN YOURSELF AND OTHERS?

There are four distinct but interrelated types of homophobia: personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural.

Personal homophobia is prejudice based on a personal belief that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are sinful, immoral, sick, inferior to heterosexuals, or incomplete women and men.

Personal homophobia is experienced as feelings of fear, discomfort, dislike, hatred, or disgust with same-sex sexuality. Anyone, regardless of their sexual orientation or preference, can experience personal homophobia; when this happens with lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, it is called **internalized homophobia**.

Like heterosexuals, lesbians, gays, and bisexuals are taught that same-sex sexuality is inferior to heterosexuality, and many internalize this to the point where self-acceptance is difficult. They accept the stigma attached to being lesbian, gay, or bisexual without realizing that their experience is the result of oppression. One result of this is that some lesbians, gays, and bisexuals carefully conceal their identity; others try desperately to deny or change their sexual orientation; and some have tried or succeeded in committing suicide.

Interpersonal homophobia is individual behavior based on personal homophobia. This hatred or dislike may be expressed by name-calling, telling "jokes", verbal and physical harassment, and other individual acts of discrimination.

Interpersonal homophobia, in its extreme, results in lesbians, gays, and bisexuals being physically assaulted for no other reason than their assailants' homophobia. Most people act out their fears of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in non-violent, more commonplace ways. Relatives often shun their lesbian, gay, and bisexual family members; co-workers are distant and cold to lesbian, gay, and bisexual colleagues; heterosexual friends aren't interested in hearing about their lesbian, gay, and bisexual friends' relationships.

Institutional homophobia refers to the many ways in which government, businesses, churches, and other institutions and organizations discriminate against people on the basis of sexual orientation. Institutional homophobia is also called **heterosexism**.

Institutional homophobia is reflected in religious organizations which have stated or implicit policies against lesbians, gays, and bisexuals leading services; agencies which refuse to allocate resources for services to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people; and governments which fail to insure the rights of all citizens, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Cultural homophobia refers to social standards and norms which dictate that being heterosexual is better or more moral than being lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and that everyone is or should be heterosexual. Cultural homophobia is also called **heterosexism**.

Cultural homophobia is spelled out each day in television shows and print advertisements where virtually every character is heterosexual, every erotic relationship involves a female and a male, and every "normal" child is presumed to be attracted to and will eventually marry someone of the other sex. In the few cases where lesbians, gays, or bisexual are portrayed, they are usually unhappy, stereotyped, engaged in self-destructive behaviors, or ambivalent about their sexual orientation.

HOW DOES HOMOPHOBIA HURT HETEROSEXUALS?

Homophobia and heterosexism clearly oppress lesbians, gay males, and bisexual females and males through individual acts of verbal and physical harassment and collective actions which result in invisibility, invalidation, and discrimination. But homophobia and heterosexism also hurt heterosexuals. By maintaining rigid definitions of "appropriate" sex-role behavior and relationships, the relaxed enjoyment of any kind of sensual interaction or emotional closeness among women and men is curtailed. The fear of being thought of as homosexual restricts the development of intimacy among same-sex friends. These fears contribute to stress and emotional inflexibility and can destroy heterosexual relationships.

Homophobia also destroys families when parents discover that one of their children is lesbian, gay, or bisexual. How much better it would be to preserve family unity by supporting and honoring all relatives, regardless of their sexual orientation or affectional preference.

In a society where the achievements of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are hidden or scorned, heterosexuals get a distorted view of reality; they only learn about the lives of other heterosexuals. They are denied the opportunity of learning from the experiences, skills, and knowledge of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals. Heterosexuals could enrich their own lives by being in contact with lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

The denial of equal civil rights to lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons inevitably leads to limitations on the rights of all. Governments that have been most oppressive to homosexuals have also oppressed people on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and class. If lesbian, gay, and bisexual people can be targeted for discrimination, any other group in the society can also be targeted. If we genuinely believe in freedom and individual rights, then we will value all people and the differences between them which contribute so much to our pluralistic society.

WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF HOMOPHOBIA?

Personal homophobia (prejudice) is primarily caused by misinformation. As with racism and sexism, people are taught to be homophobic. Myths about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are perpetuated in our society despite the availability of accurate information. Few children are given any unbiased information about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people; many adults continue to believe the stereotypes they learned as children; and some religious and conservative organizations promote lies about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

Interpersonal homophobia (harassment and individual discrimination) can be explained by considering psychological factors in conjunction with prejudice. People who are not comfortable with their own sexuality, or who feel threatened by same-sex sexuality, tend to be more rigid about what is sexually "right" and may try to punish or force their beliefs on lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

Institutional homophobia is caused in part by competition for power. Societies such as ours create scapegoats to maintain the status quo and the positions of those in power. During this

century, groups such as Jews, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latin Americans, American Indians, women, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual people have all been blamed for a variety of social and economic problems. When scapegoating is successful, dominant groups don't need to take responsibility for injustice or give up privilege.

Cultural homophobia is largely caused by social norms which dictate "correct" sexuality. Sexual contact between women, and between men, has been practiced in all societies throughout history and is openly accepted in many cultures. But Western civilization is generally repressive of sexuality in any form, other than intercourse necessary for procreation or sexual activity in the context of heterosexual marriage. Therefore, same-sex sexuality will certainly be feared or damned.

CAN HOMOPHOBIA BE CURED?

Homophobia is pervasive in this and many other societies. Because we are all products of our society, most of us are homophobic, regardless of our sexual orientation. Assume that you are homophobic.

Dealing constructively with homophobia first requires an acknowledgement of its pervasive existence. We cannot easily eradicate our homophobic feelings, but if we are willing to acknowledge that we are all homophobic, then we can begin to take responsibility for our choices and change our behaviors.

In addition to assuming the ever presence of homophobia, we can do the following:

Identify homophobia, not homosexuality, as the problem to be addressed. In conversations with friends and colleagues, speak out about homophobia. For many people, the only time that they talk about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people is in the context of homophobic "jokes."

Think about the similarities and differences between homophobia and other forms of oppression. Use what you know about racism, sexism, classism, etc., to better understand homophobia and to look for ways to respond to homophobia.

Listen to the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and assume that their experience with oppression is valid. Similarly, assume that the ways in which lesbian, gay, and bisexual people experience the world are different from the ways in which heterosexuals experience the world.

Actively support anti-discrimination efforts, as well as campaigns to stop homophobic prejudice and violence.

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