

## Ageism and Lesbophobia

Presented at The OLOC Gathering, August 2006 in Durham, North Carolina by Sharon Raphael, Ph.D. Professor Emerita, Cal. State Univ. Dominguez Hills

OLOC is in an unusual position to carry on the tradition of its founders and early pioneers, women like Barbara Macdonald, Baba Copper, and Shevy Healy who saw prejudice toward old people from the unique position of being feminists and lesbians. Standing outside the traditional heterosexist fold, these women were able to see the importance of resisting stereotyped ideas of what old women and in this case what old Lesbians should be and do with their lives in spite of the great obstacles involved in living in an ageist and sexist society. The purpose of this panel is to challenge and encourage all of us to continue to fight lesbophobic, ageist, and sexist thinking and behavior that might get in the way of our leading fulfilling and creative lives.

These are some of the traps we can fall into that can keep us from being the old Lesbians we would like to be, free to make our own choices about our destinies and purpose in life.

One big trap I would like to mention is the Invisibility Trap. It has been pointed out by observers of aging that old people in general are not seen as sexual beings, the idea of sexuality and oldness does not sit well with younger people because they are under the assumption that oldness and sexuality are mutually exclusive. Women with grey hair and wrinkles tend to all be viewed as helpless grandmotherly figures.

Some old Lesbians use this burden to their advantage, avoiding a kind of visibility that might make them in certain situations vulnerable to Lesbophobia. On the other hand, consistently avoiding visibility as Lesbians can work at cross purposes with the identity we have about who we are and how that identity may affect what we want to do with our lives in later life. Each Lesbian must choose for herself how far up the visibility road she wants to go.

Another trap to avoid is confronting the ageism that exists in the LGBT community itself. Although changes have taken place in part as a result of the work OLOC has done on this issue, there is a need for old Lesbians to resist and be aware that younger Lesbians and Gay men and others in our community do have prejudices and fears about aging that spill out and sometimes affect our lives in negative ways.

In group settings we often are not treated as equals. Barbara Macdonald in her

book *Look Me in the Eye* drew our attention to the practice of younger Lesbians putting us on pedestals and using us as the Mothers they would have wanted, a practice that keeps both young and old from having equal and healthy relationships. .

The Sexism in our Society is a trap that is hard to overcome but not hard to fight against and be aware of. Women have second class status and Lesbians even less status; therefore if we add the category “old” to that it translates to triple stigma and then if one goes on to add a few other categories i.e. race, class or disability we then can see the stigmatization factor becoming very weighty indeed. One reason we form groups like OLOC is to change the way society sees these stereotypical ways of classifying people.

Lesbophobia is an ism that affects us most profoundly as we grow older and old. It is the reason many Lesbians avoid institutions that serve older adults out of fear of either being discovered or being mistreated or both. Not having the safeguards of marriage equality affects the security for those of us who have partners. Discrimination against Lesbians in assisted care and nursing facilities has been documented. .

OLOC is a Lesbian organization that affirms aging and helps us identify in a positive way with the term OLD which is a powerful idea, a very feminist idea, and an idea that is very unpopular out there in the outer world. I guess we could call it the so called “real world” but that is relative.

OLOC needs to affirm the term LESBIAN in the same way as we affirm and take on the word OLD. Just as it was true that it was Lesbians who gave the much needed woman power to many aspects of the feminist movement, it is OLD Lesbians who are intellectually in the vanguard of not only truly understanding what ageism does to old women but are acting as role models for what to do to avoid the pitfalls of ageism. But the problem is that old women are not listening to us to any large degree in part because of their own Lesbophobia which we must fight not only for our own self interest but also in order to be heard.

Old Lesbians Organizing for Change (OLOC) has a unique opportunity to share what we have learned with the wider world but the first step must be to educate and change ourselves. .... Once we have integrated all these ideas on a personal level, we can then reach out to the wider world and make a big noise collectively and as individuals.

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