

ATLANTA LESBIAN FEMINIST ALLIANCE

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The Asexual Manifesto

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I. Origin and Definition.

Our experiences with sexuality have not been congruent with our feminist values. As our consciousness became raised on this issue we began to see how sex had permeated our lives and the lives of others. We categorized our relationships in terms of sex ----- either friends or lovers. We engaged in a "sizing up" process, however subtle or subconscious, with each new person, accepting or rejecting her/him as a possible sexual partner even if we never intended to become sexually involved. We arbitrarily rejected whole groups of people as unsuitable for intimate relationships because we assumed that such rela-

* In September 1972, the Co-ordinating Council of New York Radical Feminists formed caucuses based on similarity of sexual orientation. Each caucus was to explore its members' personal and political attitudes about their sexuality and communicate these views to the larger group. Barbie Hunter Getz and I realized that we would not feel comfortable in any of the proposed caucuses (heterosexual, Lesbian, bisexual) and formed our own. Out of this caucus came a paper of which the "Asexual Manifesto" is a revision. That the paper's plural form has been retained does not imply that all views expressed in this final version necessarily reflect the views of both the original co-authors.

tionships, by definition, necessarily included sex. Often we chose to spend time with people simply on the basis of their sexual availability (the "bar scene"). As we became aware of this in ourselves, we became painfully aware of how we were being objectified by others.

Asexuality is an outgrowth of this consciousness. It is a concept we have come to employ out of the wish to communicate ----- not merely through being but also through language ----- our struggle to rid ourselves of sexism in our personal lives.

In this paper we have used the terms "sex" and "sexual" to describe any activity one goal of which is genital excitation or orgasm. Physical affection and sensuality (including kissing) are not, by this definition, sexual unless they are directed towards the goal of genital excitation.

We chose the term "asexual" to describe ourselves because both "celibate" and "anti-sexual" have connotations we wished to avoid: the first implies that one has sacrificed sexuality for some higher good, the second that sexuality is degrading or somehow inherently bad. "Asexual", as we use it, does not mean "without sex" but "relating sexually to no one". This does not, of course, exclude masturbation but implies that if one has sexual feelings they do not require another person for their expression. Asexuality is, simply, self-contained sexuality.

II. Philosophy

Our philosophy of asexuality grew out of our personal ethics, which have been reshaped by our feminist consciousness. To us, as to many other women, feminism means more than the fight against sexism. It means "sisterhood" ----- a new way of relating, perhaps a new way of life. Feminist morality, at this stage in history, can only be defined as antithetical to the oppressive values of our society (e.g. competition, objectification). On a personal level, it is reflected in our beliefs that: we should attempt to relate to others in their totality as much as possible and not view them as objects existing for the gratification of our needs; we must not exploit others ----- that is, use them "unjustly or improperly" ----- nor allow ourselves to be exploited; we must not be dishonest with ourselves or with those we respect. In addition, we believe that we each have the responsibility for examining our behavior, determining how it has been affected by sexist conditioning, and changing it if it does not meet our standards.

As feminists, we had decried the sexual exploitation of women by men without seeing that we too had used others "unjustly and improperly". Interpersonal sex is not an instinctive behavior pattern; it is behavior we have learned to use for the satisfaction of a need (for orgasm) which we can easily satisfy for ourselves. We came to see this use of others as exploitative and realized that in allowing others to use us in this

way we were acquiescing in our own exploitation.

In our attempt to be honest with ourselves we tried to determine what our real needs are. We saw that we have needs for affection, warmth, skin contact, which we had been taught to satisfy through interpersonal sex. As we began to satisfy these needs in our "friendships," our need for and interest in sex diminished. We also realized that we had a need for intimacy, a state we had always seen as "completed" by sex. In retrospect, we realized that we, and others, had used sex as a means of self-deception, as a way of avoiding real closeness rather than achieving it.

We had struggled against our conditioning in many ways, especially in terms of roles, but we had avoided examining the basic conditioning which had shaped our sexuality. It is difficult even to speculate on the nature of "ideal sexuality" (uninfluenced by sexism) but we are certain that it would not occupy as much of our lives as it does in this society. We live in a culture of "fetish-worshippers" who regard sex with an extreme and irrational amount of attention. Just as many of us were conditioned to direct our energy into the preparation of lavish meals, creating a fetish out of a simple need to avoid confrontation with the emptiness of our lives as women, so we were conditioned to seek sexual satisfaction in convoluted and circuitous ways. Since our involvement with feminism, our lives have been increasingly meaningful and we no longer feel the need for fetishes.

In examining our experiences relative to our values, we have come to asexuality as a stand and a state of being concurrently. Interpersonal sex is no longer important to us, no longer worth the distorted and often destructive role it has played in relationships. It no longer defines our relationships or in any way constitutes our identities. As asexual women, we do not (1) seek, initiate, or continue relationships in order to experience interpersonal sex, (2) use others for the satisfaction of our sexual needs or allow ourselves to be so used, (3) attempt to satisfy other needs (e.g. for affection, warmth, intimacy) through interpersonal sex, or (4) perceive others according to their potential, or lack of it, as sex partners. In essence then, our asexuality reflects a rejection of interpersonal sex as long as it cannot meet our conditions: that it be both congruent with our values and totally incidental and unimportant to our relationships.

III Politics

Basic to the liberation of women is the destruction of sexism, one manifestation of which is the sexual exploitation of women by men. Asexuality is a step towards achieving this goal at the personal level, as it eliminates one means by which men oppress us. Through our asexuality, we have excluded sex as a goal and, essentially, even as a possibility in any relationships we may happen to have with men.

Because of the patriarchal culture which has resulted from institutionalized sexism, the exploitative behavior, standard in such a culture, has made it extremely difficult

for women to realize their own independent, more humane style of relating. Most women consequently reflect, in their relationships with each other, some of the exploitative behavior patterns characteristic of our male oppressors. One area where the oppression of women by women may occur is, again, the sexual; this oppression too must end before we can be truly free. Through asexuality, we have rejected sex as a goal in our relationships with women, thus avoiding the sexual objectification, exploitation, and oppression of our sisters. Here too, we reject any possibility of sex unless our conditions are met, and we thereby prevent ourselves from being sexually exploited and oppressed.

To destroy a particular culture's basic myths is to undermine its very foundations. Patriarchal culture, based as it is on sex differentiation, has constructed some of its strongest myths around sexuality. We believe it is of prime importance that feminism direct itself to the exposure and destruction of the current patriarchal mythology which, through deception, reinforces our oppression. Those myths most responsible for the distorted role sex plays in women's lives are:

- (1) Interpersonal sex is essential since the sex drive is a powerful force in human life and, if unsatisfied (through interpersonal sex), tends to produce unhappiness or possibly illness,
- (2) It is important that any sexual excitation always and/or immediately be satisfied,
- (3) Sex is essential for closeness in a relationship, no relationship being complete without it,
- (4) The ultimate closeness in a relationship occurs during sex and/or orgasm,
- (5) The needs for physical affection and sex are basically the same,

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(6) It is almost impossible satisfactorily to express affection physically without sexual excitation also occurring,

(7) Women who have little interest in interpersonal sex, or who rarely if ever reach orgasm, are somehow inadequate (undersexed, frigid).

While all these myths may not be credible to all women, some women believe some of them some of the time.

Finally, we see a conflict between, on the one hand, the time and energy necessary to our struggle as feminists, and, on the other hand, the time and energy necessary to develop and maintain relationships in which sex is a goal. If we would use our energy efficiently, a choice seems indicated: to struggle against sexism or to struggle for satisfactory sex. Although it may be said that to turn one's back on a problem is not to solve it, we think the truth of this statement is relative to the importance one places on the problem. If we saw interpersonal sex as important, asexuality would be a cop-out; since we do not, it is instead a means of withdrawing our energy from an area in which we feel it is being wasted.

We see asexuality as an efficient "alternative life-style" for revolutionary women but we do not claim that "asexuality is revolution." We call ourselves "self-identified women" but we do not demand that all feminists adopt this title. Our statement is simply this: as a result of examining the nature of our sexuality and reclaiming it from the sexist misconceptions surrounding it, we are able to form and maintain relationships in a way which both reflects our values and is effective in our liberation struggle. For us, asexuality is a

commitment to defy and ultimately to destroy the baseless concepts, surrounding both sex and relationships, which support and perpetuate the patriarchy.

(Additional copies of this paper may be obtained @ \$.25 from New York Radical Feminists, Box 621, Old Chelsea Station, N.Y., N.Y., 10011. This "Manifesto" is not the last word on asexuality; it is only a beginning. I welcome your comments and criticisms.)