

Panel on Ageism and Lesbophobia: Look Us in the Eye Introduction by Sharon Raphael, Ph.D., 1941

Presented August 19, 2006 in Durham, North Carolina at The Sheraton Imperial Hotel

For Old Lesbians Organizing For Change Conference “Leave No Old Lesbian Behind”

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 heterosexual 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. Thus it is easy for Lesbians who fit the bill of looking like the stereotype of being seen in the same mold. Of course, looking at women in this sexist way is not good for heterosexual women, either, but it places a special burden on the Old Lesbian. It is the burden of invisibility.

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. It is important to be “out” to family and friends for many reasons. The most important reason is integrity, standing up for oneself. Other reasons are more practical and may help simplify our lives in the long run. For example, letting family know it is your significant other or domestic partner or even an ex-lover who is next of kin, not them.

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. Sometimes in group settings we 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. There is also the habit of making Old Lesbians into “keepers of the wisdom,” which in and of itself may not be a bad thing, but when emphasized as though as though it is our only saving grace, this form of objectification becomes another obstacle to achieving integration and equality in the LGBT community.

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 you add the category “old” to that, you are talking about triple stigma and then add a few other categories, i.e., race, class, or disability you 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. Part of this sexist pattern can be seen within the field of practicing gerontologists, whether gay or straight, when they institute programs and services which do not fit the profile and needs of strong, independent-minded Old Lesbians and instead relegate old women in general to traditional grandmother roles, i.e., taking care of infants in an intergenerational setting or always involving them in food preparation.

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 security for those of us who have partners. Discrimination against Lesbians in assisted care and nursing facilities has been documented. Although new housing options are available within the LGBT community, many of these new living places are too expensive for low-income or low/middle-class Old Lesbians, which forces most Old Lesbians to think about subsidized housing or Medicare subsidized nursing or home care where staff is usually not sensitized to the needs of LGBT seniors and if they are, this does not mean that the old people in the beds or rooms next door or down the hall are free from homophobic beliefs.

Lesbophobia is a problem that is not only an issue for the outer world but is also an issue that we as Old Lesbians must confront in our own internal selves. OLOC has been seen as a visionary group of Old Lesbians who fight ageism, but I see OLOC as bigger than that and as a group of Old Lesbians who see the connections between lesbophobia and ageism and who must fight both isms on the same front. Lesbophobia and ageism have the same enemy and come from the same diseased root that foments narrow-minded ideas about what women and men can do and cannot do. Lesbophobia and ageism result from anti-feminist views that put people in straitjackets and restrict our views of our own humanity. Our job should be and has been to some degree to integrate who we are and what we want.

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 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. That first step should be an acknowledgement that we are fighting two isms, ageism and lesbophobia, on one front. Stepping up to the challenge means not allowing ourselves to fall into the invisibility or ageism trap within our own community, continuing to fight sexism, and seeing the connections between feminism and the fight against ageism. 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.