

Essay Award Winner 2004 (Second Prize)

“Most People Need Constant Reminders Not To Presume Heterosexuality:”
Institutionalized Heterosexuality, Lesbianism and the Oppression of Women
In The Workforce

by Angela Turner

In this essay I will explore the ways that women have been constrained in the public sphere of paid labour by institutionalized ideals of heterosexuality, and how this ideology of heterosexuality has led to the oppression of all women in the paid labour force and, more specifically, how institutionalized heterosexuality has hindered the rights and freedoms of sexual “others” in the workforce, especially homosexual women. First, I will provide some definitions of institutional heterosexuality, and how it has been utilized and internalized in our society, and in the public sphere of work. Secondly, I will present the ways in which institutionalized heterosexuality oppresses all women in general, by conflating issues of sexism and heterosexism. Lastly I will examine how institutionalized heterosexuality oppresses lesbians who do not fit into the ideal of “normal” sexuality, how the privileging of heterosexuality in our society encourages the denial and oppression of any alternative modes of sexuality, thereby stifling sexual diversity, and freedom.

The main concept that I will take up in this essay is the idea that heterosexuality is a cultural construct and a social institution. A lot of feminist work in the area of social constructs is based on the idea that sex and gender are not necessarily biologically determined, but rather that they are constructed based on our cultural and societal ideals of what a woman is and what a man is (namely that these two categories are completely dichotomous). Not only are the social ideals of masculinity and femininity constructed, they also support a highly problematic system of hierarchies which establishes the privileged status of men over women. When combined with the social construction of heterosexuality, our society ends up with an entire ideological system in which the *fundamental* building blocks are based on relationships of dominance and subordination between men and women. Adrienne Rich was one of the first feminist theorists to explore the area of compulsory heterosexuality in her article “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Her theory looks at the constructed nature of sex and gender, as well as the ways in which our social and cultural ideals help to construct our desire and how we are socialized towards heterosexuality: that it is not necessarily “natural,” or biological (Rich, 1994: 488). To take Rich's theories further, not only are sex, gender and heterosexuality social constructs, heterosexuality has also become a social *institution*. Gillian A. Dunne, in her book “Lesbian Lifestyles” defines a social institution as:

[The] basic regulatory patterns which order and reflect everyday social activities.... The power of institutions lies in their appearance as objective realities which are universal and legitimate.... They exist as part of the fabric of society and are essential elements for supporting social stability and the reproduction of the status quo.... [Institutions also imply] the illegitimacy of alternative arrangements.... [They] appear as ‘givens’ and are

supported by belief systems which compromise a range of mutually reinforcing ideologies (1997:12-13).

When heterosexuality becomes a social institution any “alternative” to this normalized institution becomes “deviant,” “other” and therefore unacceptable. The problem is not necessarily with heterosexuality itself, the problem is that through *institutionalized* heterosexuality women's inequality and subordination to the dominant (white) male is most heavily reinforced. The ideology of heterosexuality is heavily laden with sanctions which privilege and legitimize male power over women. Therefore any study of women's subordination in the public sphere of paid labour should *necessarily* include an analysis of the ways in which women's power and equality are continually undermined within this problematic hierarchical institution of heterosexuality.

Although the institution of heterosexuality is problematic and fundamental to women's inequality in our society, as well as women's inequality in the public sphere of paid labour, an analysis of the institution of heterosexuality itself has been consistently left out of the readings we have looked at in this course, and in many analyses of women's position in the workforce. In fact, the subject of institutionalized heterosexuality, and the experiences of those outside of this institution (lesbians) have been systematically under-represented in writings about women in the paid labour force. [1] One feminist who has attempted to bridge this gap in research is Gillian A. Dunne. Through her research she:

seeks to build bridges across the different perspectives which inform feminist thinking by showing ways that interpretations of sexuality deeply shape the conditions of women's work, both in the home and in the workplace. Until now, research has considered factors shaping women's work from a heterosexual perspective and this limits our ability to recognize the impact of heterosexuality itself on the conditions of women's lives (1997:2).

In her analysis of “non-heterosexual” (Dunne, 1997:1) women in all aspects of life, work, and the family, Dunne takes the first necessary steps towards questioning the highly problematic, yet fundamental institution of heterosexuality. An analysis of this institution is vital in order to understand women's relative positions of inequality in the labour force, as well as the particularly oppressed positions of lesbian women in the workforce. [2]

With the recognition of heterosexuality as an ideological myth which our culture has institutionalized, we can go on to analyze aspects of our culture that, when heterosexuality is “normalized,” contribute to women's positions of oppression and subordination. We can see this oppression and subordination in many aspects of women's work, especially the wage gap.

In this course we have looked at many statistics that have shown that women, throughout the world and here in Canada, have been denied the same kinds of jobs, job status, wages and full-time opportunities that men have, which would place women and men on more equal playing fields in the workforce (and in the world in general). We have found that, for the most part, the reason for this inequality has little to do with women's inherent or

biological inability to do certain jobs that are valued in our society. Rather, our society has certain expectations about women's relationship with paid work. Women's work is consistently valued less than men's work and this value is reflected in the kinds of jobs, the pay, the hours the status, and the benefits that women receive. Ideally within our culture, a woman's role in the public sphere of paid labour is secondary to her role as wife and mother within the heterosexual context of the nuclear family unit. [3] The result of this cultural ideology is that women's position within the paid labour force is less valued and therefore less rewarded in order to reproduce ideals about women's place in the home and the domestic sphere. Dunne's respondents provide evidence of this fact: [Most of the] women understood marriage to be the inevitable outcome of their assumed heterosexuality. They expected that marriage would involve the rearrangement of priorities, whereby home life and domestic commitments would eclipse employment involvement. For them, marriage represented long-term economic security through access to a higher 'breadwinning' wage (1997:94).

Women (and men) are expected to engage in heterosexual relationships and produce children, and their wages reflect these expectations: men's pay is primary (so they get paid more), women's pay is secondary (so they get paid less). The assumption is that women will be supported by a man's primary income when she gives up her job to take care of their children. Men's jobs are full-time, while women are more geared towards part-time work (in order to have more time to have kids and take care of the family). All of these aspects of women's (and men's) work are generated with the heterosexual model in mind, and they reproduce specific ideals about masculinity and femininity.

Generally all of these constructed characteristics of women's and men's work are beneficial for heterosexual couples and nuclear families. However these characteristics of work which support the heterosexual "norm" also directly contribute to a significant amount of the inequality and oppression that women face within the paid labour force. This is not only oppressive for heterosexual women (for whom the heterosexual "norm" is adequate), but it is especially oppressive for those women (and men) who fall outside of the heterosexual model: women who do not (or cannot) rely on a man's primary income: lesbian women, and same-sex lesbian couples (as well as single women, single mothers, and women in other "non-traditional," "non-heterosexual" living arrangements such as siblings, roommates, and so on.

As we have seen, not only does the heterosexual "norm" deny any alternative sexuality, it also oppresses any woman who may be heterosexual, but who does not choose, or want to live in a heterosexual relationship with a man). The conflation of issues of female celibacy (life without men, whether as a choice or merely circumstance) and lesbianism is something that Cavanaugh brings up in her article. Any woman who did not want to be in a relationship with a man, whether she was heterosexual or homosexual, was deemed a sexual deviant in the mid-20 th century (1998: 68). Although the sanctions for such a label were perhaps more severe in the past, I think there is still a lot of stigma and social pressures that are similar in today's society, and within the working world. In this way, it is possible to see how the institution of heterosexuality has problematically structured

inequality of women in the public sphere of paid labour, and more specifically how it has alienated and further contributed to the inequality and subordination of lesbians and, in general, any woman who is *not* actively practicing heterosexuality.

Dunne's analysis of lesbian women in the workforce gives us a perspective on women's lives in the paid labour force, and women in general, which goes beyond the assumptions of the heterosexual norm. She shows that although lesbians are generally oppressed by heterosexualization, women who are outside of the heterosexual ideal can sometimes have a better understanding of the functions of this ideology, and are therefore more likely to structure their working careers in order to succeed beyond the traditional limits and assumptions of their sex/gender. The lesbians in her study were not limited to thinking of their career moves in relation to the inevitable heterosexual marriage and nuclear family life. In fact Dunne found that:

Sexual identity [often] mediates the effects of gender to support different outcomes in relation to the negotiation of employment opportunities. This will highlight the importance of recognizing the role of institutionalized heterosexuality in constraining women's choices (1997:92).

Therefore, she finds that generally the lesbians within her study [4] had a different “framework of understanding” (Dunne, 1997:99): their positions on the periphery of the heterosexual model meant that they were less entrenched in heterosexual assumptions, and although they were oppressed by the workings of institutionalized heterosexuality, they were also able to structure their career aspirations more freely, without the assumption that they would eventually get married, and give up their jobs to raise their children. The position of lesbians outside the ideology of heterosexuality can sometimes give them insight and choice when it comes to work, and therefore they have a better view of the problematic aspects of this ideology, and the means with which to critique and change them:

[A]ttitudes towards [women's] employment were guided by taken for granted conventional accounts of social reality, where adult womanhood was heterosexual, experienced within the context of marriage, and involved being dependent on a male wage. Within this framework of understanding, the anticipated avenue of escape from dull routine jobs was through attachment to a male breadwinner. Because of powerfully contradictory experience these [lesbian] respondents could no longer anticipate the arrival of a knight in shining armour. Their new understanding of what being an adult woman meant motivated a more self-reliant approach to paid work.... Their changing attitudes and approaches towards employment were very much related to their move beyond heterosexuality (Dunne, 1997:98-99).

Dunne finds that the lesbian women in her study, because of their sexuality, were able to expand their potential in the labour force beyond the kind of job opportunities that were traditionally available to women. In a way, their sexuality mediated more equal opportunities in the working world. Because lesbians go beyond the possibility of identifying with the heterosexual ideology, they come to an understanding that

heterosexual women, who are deeply entrenched within this ideology, might not be able to: they can get out of the cycle of oppression, and strive to find work that allows them more equality: better hours, better pay, better benefits, and higher status. [5]

Yet it can work the other way as well: any woman who attains rewarding and valued employment, or has the option available to her may find it easier to “reconsider the desirability of marriage” (Dunne, 1997:102) and put her career first. This can include a range of women, heterosexual or homosexual, who no longer want to be burdened by the weight of compulsory heterosexuality and/or economic dependence. A study for Statistics Canada found that “women's personal earnings are positively related to the likelihood of separation”(Wu and Pollard, 1999:26) from a heterosexual, common-law partner.

Furthermore, this study found that:

Increased social resources for women, in addition to economic resources, also appear to decrease the probability of marriage, illustrated by full-time semi-professional and skilled employee status increasing separation [Tables 1 and 2]. For women with these resources available, marriage may be less desirable, or separation from bad unions may be facilitated (Wu and Pollard, 1999:26).

For heterosexual woman, greater economic resources generally mean that dependence on a male breadwinner is no longer necessary. Unfortunately these “resources” are available to only an elite group of women (who can afford the education in order to get the “career-line” job that can propel them into economic independence). [6]

There is no denying that women's access to better employment and better wages is fundamental to improving *all* women's equality in the paid labour force and the world at large (even within women's heterosexual relationships with men). The fundamental problem of institutionalized heterosexuality is not only that it limits women's success within the working world, but that it also limits women's choice of sexuality, and subsequently reduces women's opportunities to question their positions of relative subordination in relation to men and within the paid labour force.

[A]ccess to rewarding and challenging jobs provide[s] the economic possibility of living outside dependent relationships with men. It also offer[s] a positive alternative social identity to that of wife and mother. For these respondents a lesbian lifestyle was seen to *facilitate* the pursuit of their careers (Dunne, 1997:107).

Lesbians are less likely to take for granted the heterosexual myth of women being taken care of by a primary male breadwinner, therefore we can see the ways in which a “lesbian lifestyle necessitat[es] and/or facilitat[es] economic independence” (Dunne, 1997:119).

Lesbians tend to have access to better employment and wages (and therefore more economic independence) compared to heterosexual women, yet this still does not necessarily mean that lesbians are being paid wages that are equal to men's wages (Dunne, 1997:127).

Even within the realm of traditionally “masculine” jobs, women still tend to make less than their equally skilled male counterparts: men still consistently earn “breadwinning wages” while women's wages are generally consistent with secondary wages. This leaves

women in economically vulnerable positions in our society. Since most women's wages are barely enough to support them, women are basically forced into dependency on heterosexual male partners (married or common law) in order to survive. Indeed as a Statistics Canada study shows, when (presumably heterosexual) women are able to earn enough money for their economic independence, they are more likely to dissolve their common-law (heterosexual) living situations with men:

[W]omen's economic circumstances contribute significantly to the stability of Canadian cohabitations. Women's economic circumstances primarily affect the probability of separation. Increased economic and social resources make marriage less desirable [Table 2], or facilitate the dissolution of unions [Table 1] (Wu and Pollard, 1999:27).

Women's financial dependence on men merely contributes to their positions of subordination in a patriarchal heterosexist culture which relies on the two separate dichotomous, hierarchical roles for men and women. In this way we see how wages themselves are set up to support our societal ideal of institutionalized heterosexuality (because generally women cannot survive economically without dependence on men).

While most studies of the current wage gap (such as that done by Marie Drolet for Statistics Canada) may take many factors into consideration to determine why this wage gap occurs, there is still a significant amount of data missing in order to come up with a definitive reason for the discrepancies between women's pay and men's pay. As Drolet finds: "a substantial portion of the gender wage gap cannot be explained" (1997:32). However, Dunne found that lesbian women, as workers, whether in committed homosexual relationships or not, choose their employment based neither on "social expectations to be primary breadwinners, nor by the constraints associated with being secondary earners" (1997:176). In this way it is possible to see the role of lesbians in the paid labour force has potential to defy the socially constructed dichotomy of male and female roles as workers.

To defy women's traditional role as a secondary earner is one positive way in which women can also defy the institutionalized heterosexuality that structures the working world. The fact that the wage gap cannot be entirely explained in mainstream statistical studies may have something to do with the heterosexist assumptions of the researchers or those that they study. Perhaps what the study by Drolet (and others like it) is missing is the extent to which our entire culture has internalized heterosexuality and all of its sanctions. Perhaps that which we cannot account for in women's consistently lower wages in Canada, is partly a product of this ideology of heterosexuality which we are too deeply entrenched in to effectively critique. Perhaps research such as Dunne's on the lesbian experience of paid work, and the pervasive oppressive qualities of institutional heterosexuality are *necessary* in order to bring about a new perspective on the wage gap in Canada and around the world.

As this essay has tried to show, absolute exclusion of any identity within any discipline is problematic because it ends up setting a precedence of "normalcy." In this case, the taken-for-granted position of heterosexuality has resulted in the ultimate exclusion of representations of "other" forms of sexuality, namely lesbianism. But by going against

tradition and analyzing the experiences and positions of subordination of these so-called “others” within patriarchal heterosexist arena of paid labour, we can see the definite ways in which lesbian women are oppressed by this normalized, internalized and institutionalized heterosexist tradition in the workforce. However, we can also see how institutionalized heterosexuality contributes to the oppression of *all* women. Gillian A. Dunne's analysis of lesbian experience is very important to this line of research because it:

...illuminates the need to extend our analysis of women's disadvantaged employment circumstances beyond gender to include the significance of interpretations of sexuality. To fail to do this is to perpetuate the belief that women equals heterosexual and to ignore the material and ideological processes which construct heterosexual outcomes. Instead, we need to recognize the extent to which gendered attitudes and experiences are shaped and expressed through beliefs, values and practices supporting institutional heterosexuality (1997:102).

Thus, the inclusion of lesbian issues into the study of women's oppression in the workforce, and the wage gap is important, perhaps even *necessary*, in order to see the full spectrum of oppression that women— *all women* —face. All women are different and unique, and inhabit different identities, and these vastly different women are also oppressed differently in their daily lives. It is important to consider all the ways that these different oppressions affect all women differently. This means that we need to analyze and consider, not only the “norm” of heterosexuality but also issues of homosexuality. [7] There is no “universal” woman, and therefore the issues of *all* women must be acknowledged in order to truly understand women's position of subordination and oppression in the world at large, as well as within women's roles in the paid labour force.

Appendix:

Table 1.

Source: Wu, Zheng, and Michael Pollard, *The Income and Labour Dynamics Working Paper Series: Economic Circumstances And The Stability Of Nonmarital Cohabitation*, catalogue no. 98-10 (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1997) 19, Table 3.

Table 2.

Source: Wu, Zheng, and Michael Pollard, *The Income and Labour Dynamics Working Paper Series: Economic Circumstances And The Stability Of Nonmarital Cohabitation*, catalogue no. 98-10 (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1997) 23, Table 5.

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Endnotes:

[1] Khayatt, 1994: 210. This fact became painfully clear to me as I was searching for research for this topic.

[2] Dunne finds that when heterosexuality becomes institutionalized and taken for granted as “normal” and “natural,” it effects the kind of work women aspire to: “In light of the structural limitations on [women's] entry into meaningful and adequately paid work, they may well have every reason to adhere to the belief that adult female status is achieved via a taken for granted heterosexual journey to marriage and motherhood.”(18-19)

[3] Perhaps we could even go so far as to say that these two roles are seen as contradictory, or dichotomous.

[4] Although this is by no means universally or essentially true of all lesbians.

[5] This is not to say that lesbians are the only ones who can recognize this problematic institution, or that *all* lesbians *do* realize it, just that they have a vested interest in their own success in the paid labour force because they are denied the option of male dependency.

[6] Not only are there class limits, but generally racial implications to which women can “choose” a career (I use the term choice here loosely).

[7] As well as issues of class, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, and so on.