
April 2007

The Silences Between: Are Lesbians Irrelevant? World Social Forum, Mumbai, India, 16-21 January

Susan Hawthorne

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hawthorne, Susan (2007). The Silences Between: Are Lesbians Irrelevant? World Social Forum, Mumbai, India, 16-21 January. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(3), 125-138.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol8/iss3/8>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

The Silences Between: Are Lesbians Irrelevant? World Social Forum, Mumbai, India, 16-21 January

By Susan Hawthorne¹

Abstract

In this essay, I reflect on my experience at the Mumbai World Social Forum in 2004. I begin with a discussion of silence as methodology in research with, by and about lesbians. I examine the silence around lesbian politics as well as the silences between lesbian activists and those they encounter in discussion, political activism and research settings. I explore some of the differences and similarities between Australia and India both within the mainstream culture and in the freedoms or otherwise of lesbians. I then go on to describe the workshop I organized for the Mumbai World Social Forum on "Torture of lesbians: what can be done?" in which a number of politically silencing factors come into play. I investigate the ramifications of this session in terms of the marginalization of lesbians at the World Social Forums and the implications for future Forums.

The poem that accompanies the essay is extracted from "India Sutra," a long poem that arose out of my attendance at the Mumbai World Social Forum and my subsequent travels in India with two lesbians, one of whom was born in India.

Keywords: lesbian, silence, marginalisation (or World Social Forum)

"...the many silences that fall in between the
uttered and the unutterable"

–Maya Sharma. *Loving Women: Being
Lesbian and Underprivileged in India*,
2006:104.

They hear my words
but not the silence between us.

–Susan Hawthorne, "India Sutra" 2005a:
153-4.

The World Social Forum, since its beginnings in 2001, has provided a structure for social justice activists, most of whom could be described as left-leaning and progressive and some of whom are aware of issues around class, race and ethnicity, ecology, feminism, disability and sexuality. The latter three are areas in which there is

¹ Susan Hawthorne is a Research Associate at Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia. She has a Ph.D. in Political Science and Women's Studies from the University of Melbourne. For the last four years, she has been researching the torture of lesbians and has presented her work to a wide range of fora. She has published in *Signs*, *Journal of Hate Studies*, *Women's Studies International Forum*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *NWSA Journal*, *Canadian Women's Studies* and elsewhere. She is the author of five books and (co-) editor of ten anthologies. Among her books are *The Butterfly Effect* (poetry, 2005), *Wild Politics: Feminism, Globalisation and Bio/diversity* (2002), co-editor with Bronwyn Winter of *September 11, 2001: Feminist Perspectives* (2002), co-editor with Renate Klein of *CyberFeminism: Connectivity, Critique and Creativity* (1999). She is also a novelist, aerialist, and Publisher at Spinifex Press.

much more work to be done and in this essay I want to discuss the particular gaps in knowledge around lesbian feminism. I specify lesbian feminism because there has been some incorporation of the queer agenda, and perhaps because of this, campaigns and debates relating specifically to lesbians, when the critique is made from a feminist perspective, remain marginalized and ignored. Furthermore, the high profile of “lesbian antifeminists” (Hanscombe 1991: 217) has skewed perceived agendas of lesbians to the extent that many in the heterosexual community think that what lesbians want is hot sex, sex toys, “our own pornography” and a host of other commodified “desires” that lesbian feminists have long argued against.

I have encountered similar levels of misperception and marginalization among those of the left in Australia and other Western countries, so my critique has more general application than would be suggested if I were to say that the shortcomings I point to at the Mumbai World Social Forum (WSF) were to be taken as directed solely at the Indian organizers.² However, it would also be misleading to suggest that there is no fear of the word lesbian in India. A report by Caleri, the Campaign for Lesbian Rights (1999: 17) is used by Maya Sharma (2006: 5) to indicate why she uses the word lesbian in her survey of working class lesbians in India. The word ‘lesbian’ is:

...so loaded with fear and embarrassment and prejudice, a word shrouded in silence, a whisper that spoke of an identity that must be hidden from others, that frightening word that dare not cross the threshold (Caleri Report 1999:17).

Methodology: Silence

Maya Sharma’s (2006) survey of underprivileged lesbians in India provides a rich vein of material on the effect of silence on researching lesbians. Using the word lesbian provokes what she calls a “discourse of catastrophe” (Sharma 2006: 38), while on the other side the need for nuance, for understatement can result in what might be called a discourse of ambiguity. In attempting to ascertain the nature of two women’s relationship, she is confronted by a wall of silence. She writes:

In the effort to get this critical information, if I was given only silence and ambiguity, then this was the material I would have to work with. If the silence could not be or were not to be broken, I could at least render that silence visible, acknowledge its presence, its power, its contradictions, and its inevitable consequences (Sharma 2006: 114).

Silence is a crucial factor in the methodological challenges of pursuing research on lesbians. The key to lesbian methodology is unlocking silences and making visible the hidden (Hawthorne 2003a, 2003b). This is a huge challenge to any kind of intellectual inquiry. It requires reading between the lines (Hawthorne 2006). It requires decoding language, reading through metaphors (Hawthorne 2005b) and “seeing the world slant”. It

² There is a small but growing literature by and about lesbians in India. See Namjoshi (1993a; 1993b; 1996; 2000); Thadani (1996; 2004); Vanita (2005); Sharma (2006).

also requires looking at the particularities of lesbian experiences asking questions about the concrete differences in lesbian lives—not assuming an attitude of “fitting in”.³

Lesbians are not the only group to be buried by silence. It is a strategy used against the disabled and against peoples considered to be at the margins of society (the homeless, Indigenous peoples, nomads, travellers, and gypsies). Lesbians encounter silence about our histories, about family forebears. As I write elsewhere:

Most lesbians’ lives remain undocumented in the sense that either their names are known to us but their sexuality remains hidden or their sexuality is known to us but their names remain hidden (Hawthorne 2005b: 12).

Sharma faced this paradox also when attempting to follow up on a Missing Person’s Report that indicated that two women had eloped. The report included only first names and these had been changed to protect their identities. Tracing backwards Sharma was able to find the women, but she was then confronted by the politics of speaking out, the ‘politics of utterance’ (Sharma 2006: 10). Speaking, naming, uttering are critical strategies of lesbian activists. But speaking up can cause riots, as occurred in Delhi when Deepa Mehta’s film, *Fire*, was released into cinemas in 1998. Shiv Sena, a right-wing political party organized demonstrations and demanded that the film be withdrawn because of its depiction of a “physical relationship between two married sisters-in-law living in a joint family under the same roof” (Sharma 2006: 11). To speak as lesbian, to suggest that lesbians can live rich and fulfilling lives, is to suggest that men might not be as important as they are made out to be.

Silence as a strategy of suppression intensifies the difficulty of fighting for an end to discrimination, an end to violence, and an end to the kind of marginalization that makes lesbian existence an impossible thought. So how can a lesbian speak if she has no voice? How can these faceless and nameless beings have anything to say? If she comes from nowhere and is identified with no place of her own, how can her rights be as important as all the clamouring others?

The lesbian is cast off the traditional family tree like a free-floating astronaut in space. Instead of devoting her life to reproducing that family tree, she opts to step off the branch, to speak on her own behalf, to break that brittle silence.

Part of that brittle silence is one’s own self-censoring behaviours which are particularly evident in cultural settings that are not one’s own. The silence shifts between “personalised silence” within a social, political, and cultural context as well as the self-silencing of the person coming in from outside that context. This describes the rather wobbly position I stood in at the Mumbai WSF.

Methodology: Where I Am Coming From

I have been an activist in the feminist and lesbian movements for more than thirty years (Hawthorne 2003a). My activism has spanned collectives providing support for victims of rape and abuse; organizing political and arts related conferences, events, and

³ Jennifer Kelly’s *Zest for Life: Lesbians’ Experiences of Menopause* (2005) is an excellent methodological model which challenges assumptions about lesbians in the arena of health, both among health practitioners as well as lesbians themselves.

festivals; writing, analysing, publishing and participating in grass roots political activism. I have never joined a political party. For me as a lesbian I have a heritage that is dispersed through time and place, but I am hugely influenced by my own time and place (Hawthorne 2005b).

As a lesbian feminist, I participate in the political arena as a dissenting voice. When I travelled to Mumbai in January 2004, I did so as a feminist with an academic and activist analysis of globalization and war (Hawthorne 2002; Hawthorne and Winter 2002). This analysis encompassed a political life that was simultaneously that of a participant and that of an observer. When I entered the grounds where the WSF was taking place, I brought with me the experience I have gathered as an organizer of international and local events (although none on such a grand scale as this) and my personal experience as a lesbian speaking out in a possibly hostile environment.

I had proposed a women-only session to discuss the increasing evidence of the torture of lesbians across the world, entitled, "Torture of lesbians: what can be done?" When I proposed the session, questions of language went through my head. What would be the response to the word "lesbian"? Would my use of "lesbian" lead to the workshop being rejected? Since I wanted to discuss the issue of torture of lesbians, the only path was to use "lesbian," not "same-sex," not "sexual minorities" nor "sexual orientation." With these questions rattling around in my head, I made it clear in my description of the session that it was a discussion-based workshop for lesbians, by lesbians, and about lesbians.

In the eighteen months preceding the WSF Mumbai, I had been researching the incidence of the torture of lesbians (Hawthorne 2003b) and I was interested in making links with others involved in similar research. I did not expect lesbians who had directly experienced torture to attend since it seemed unlikely that anyone with such experience would come to a workshop run by an unknown person from a foreign country. As it turned out, I was right in my estimation. I was, however, interested in increasing the awareness of lesbians and feminists that torture was occurring and in strategizing or possibly creating a network that could pool information and resources.

In the next section, I briefly describe some background on political events in Australia, especially the shift that has occurred in the past decade under a conservative government. Like the U.S.A., in Australia the so-called left has moved to the center and can sometimes be seen to endorse political policies that in the 1970s we would have labelled right wing.

Australia is not alone in being part of this shift. It is a global phenomenon and is evident in most English-speaking, European-derived countries.

The Australian Context

In Australia we have seen a significant dismantling of infrastructure which feminists and others in the left have built since the 1970s. The feminist movement from time to time is accused of either being irrelevant or disappearing or of having died. None of these things have been the case since my involvement first began around 1973. Not for me, and not for any radical feminist or lesbian activist I know. Individuals may go through periods of burn out, organizations may come and go, but there are many political campaigns that could not have been fought without the support of radical feminists and lesbians. But who will fight for lesbians when the going gets tough?

In the lead-up to the federal elections in Australia in 2004, a Family First Party campaign worker (a right-wing Christian party) made a joke about burning lesbians at the stake, and no media organization objected.⁴ If such a bad joke were made about anyone from a marginalized ethnic or religious group, voices would be raised in protest. All that happened was that the worker was later stood aside. To speak out on behalf of lesbians is somehow seen as *passé*, boring, not relevant to the real political fight. Lesbians are not just marginalized, lesbians are simply not a fashionable group to support in any campaign for justice, and I suspect that the difficulty of doing so will increase.⁵

There is a misconception that lesbians are all comfortable middle-class and well educated. This cannot be said of any group, and the evidence is overwhelmingly against it. In Western countries, lesbians are seen to have it easy because the legal position of lesbians has historically been less well defined. But lesbians have been always over-represented in prison populations; young lesbians have been incarcerated in mental asylums and often over-medicalized with treatments like electro-convulsive therapy (ECT); these days, young lesbians are offered mind-numbing anti-depressants. These are not the features of a comfortable population. In some countries, the death penalty is carried out against lesbians, and in-between lie a range of acts of violence and torture that lesbians suffer simply because of their sexual orientation (Hawthorne 2006: 33-58). In 2004, the Australian government had a chance to vote at the UN on “Human Rights and Sexual Orientation.” The Howard government took the same stance as the U.S.A. under Bush, and abstained. Outside of activist lesbian groups, there is no political campaign to institute basic human rights for lesbians. Has the media informed us that human rights, so vigorously promoted for political kudos, do not exist for lesbians? What would you want from others if you found yourself at the center of such a violation and no one spoke out on your behalf?

Even among lesbians the knowledge of these issues is not well understood, but what is understood is the visceral response: the reaction of fear and silence around the politics of lesbians. Some argue that lesbians are copping it tough because so many lesbians are having babies and bringing up children and that this scares the religious fundamentalists. But this is a smokescreen. The *reproductive medicine* industry benefits from the raised success rates of its *largely* failed technology, and children growing up in lesbian families do at least as well as children in heterosexual families. Some argue that lesbians are wanting it all, and that along with gay men now even want to take away the heterosexual ritual of marriage. So both Liberal (conservative party) and Labor (center left party) got together and, prior to the election in October 2004, introduced a new discriminatory law against marriage between lesbians or between gay men. How long since both parties decided to gang up on a single group? How many voices of protest were heard against this? Given the Howard government’s record on the UN protocol, this was not a surprising move by the conservative Liberal government. But I was appalled

⁴ It strikes me that this event in Australia shares something with the Shiv Sena protests in India. In India there was outrage, shock, and violence at the depiction of lesbian sexuality; in Australia, threats of violence against lesbians were met by a resounding silence.

⁵ I know from my own efforts of campaigning against the torture of lesbians. In spite of several approaches by me to Amnesty International, whose core business is protesting torture, and in spite of several expressions of interest in an article, when it comes to publication the article has been pushed aside for something more important.

that the Labor Party was prepared to violate progressive policies—as they have on refugees—once again.

The World Social Forum, Mumbai, India 2004

The World Social Forum slogan for Mumbai is “Another world is possible”. But just as in Australia, lesbians are sidelined, so too in this “new world” of diversity, lesbians have been pushed off the tree.⁶ In the pre-Forum information there is much talk of inclusivity, but this rhetoric of inclusivity has smothered the voices of lesbians.

Many good things are going on in activism around Dalits, Adivasis, Tribals, unionised rag-picker children in the organization Bhima Sangha, disability, as well as discussions around efforts at decriminalising Section 377, which outlaws “unnatural acts”. The latter is a derivation of the Victorian British law and unnatural acts at the time included contraception. The law these days is used to prosecute homosexual men and sometimes lesbians (Voices Against Section 377. n.d.).

My despair, however, centers on the complete marginalization of lesbians. The official program is not a good beginning. There are two sessions (out of several thousand) with the word lesbian in the title. Others contain terms such as LGBTI,⁷ sexuality, queer, sexual orientation, sexual minorities or sexual rights. I find six sessions that appear to be about sexual orientation (although the titles may be misleading). I find: “A dialogue between various movements on sexuality issues”; “Human rights violations against sexuality minorities around the world”; “Sexual Rights”; “Sexuality, Nationalism and Fundamentalism”. These sessions are held in large spaces that seat several hundred.

The two remaining sessions (including my own) specify lesbian. But almost unbelievably in a five-day program, they are at the same time in locations at opposite ends of the site—a massive venue reminiscent of an agricultural showground with barn-like venues, enormous marquees, an outdoor stage and a host of alleys filled with arts, crafts, political pamphlets, and food stalls. The two sessions are: “Lesbian activism in a fundamentalist patriarchal society” run by the Anchal Trust in C85 and “Torture of lesbians: what can be done?” in B42 run by me under the name of the Coalition of Activist Lesbians (COAL).⁸ It is not even as though the sessions were dealing with different topics. All it served to do was to split a small and committed group of women, increasing the difficulties for the organizers of both sessions.⁹

By chance, I meet the women from the Anchal Trust and we discuss the possibility of combining the two sessions, but there is no way of announcing such a change, and as both sessions are so far apart, it is not workable to redirect those wanting to attend one session to the other.

⁶ Sharma reflects on this in her story about the relationship between Rekha and Dolly (2006: 52-60). She writes: “Rekha had transgressed the boundaries of the ‘normal’, hence she had forfeited her right to familial love and care” (2006:55).

⁷ LGBTI is a common abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex. It is an uncomfortable alliance as there are many very different challenges to be met hardly any of which are congruent. Lesbians and Intersex people have complained that it does not meet their needs.

⁸ COAL (Coalition of Activist Lesbians) the only lesbian organization in the world to be a UN-registered NGO.

⁹ Reading the program, I get the sense that all the women are heterosexual (or gendered) and all the sexual minorities are men, or trans- or ungendered. So very few of us are brave.

So I go ahead with my session. I go looking for B42. I am not surprised to discover that it is located at the outer fence line, about as far away from the main action as possible. But what does surprise me when I come near to it is that the rooms run B45, B44, B43 ... B41. Where is B42? Is this a metaphor for lesbian invisibility? Yet another erasure of lesbians? Eventually I find the entrance around the other side of the row of rooms. It takes some women more than an hour to find the room.

In the program, I had specified it as a women-only session, although unknown to me this is not specified on the paper program. There are a number of sessions for Muslim women listed as women-only, so it does not seem like a controversial move.¹⁰

And so we begin. First comes a group of heterosexual (they claimed this identity) social work and psychiatry students wanting to know more. But when pressed they were quite comfortable saying that for young delinquent (their term) women in institutions they would provide first entertainment to distract them from sex with one another, and secondly counselling in order to rehabilitate them. Their strategy, therefore, is to heterosexualize any lesbians they encounter in their work. I attempt to raise the question of why these young women are in institutions? And I begin to question the students about why they are so keen for these young women potentially in their charge to return to their families in order to marry.

After some discussion, I explain that I do not see my role in this session as educating social work and psychiatry students, but that I hoped they could see how their actions could lead to the kind of trauma I was talking about. The issue here is not a huge cultural gap between India and Australia,¹¹ but rather a gap in understanding caused by an acceptance of heteropatriarchal reality as the norm. A man from the media appears at the doorway at one point, and I inform him that this is a women-only session. He accepts this and turns away.

During this discussion a number of other women have drifted in and so we move (for the third time) to introductions. We have just completed going round the group of about twenty to thirty women when another man appears. I explain that this is a women-only session. Someone explains that he is an FTM¹² transsexual. I respond, "How can I know this?" Had this person said, "I am a bearded lesbian," perhaps my response might be different. But the person in question uses a male identity. After a few responses back and forth the FTM agrees not to come in. At this point, a woman rises to leave, then another. Several other women follow suit. And the conversation that has begun so productively is shattered.

With this single "intervention", the discussion of the torture of lesbians is sidelined. I try to explain to those remaining my sense of betrayal when lesbians decide to throw in their lot with men, taking on a male identity but still wanting to be recognised as women; when transsexuals (whether MTF or FTM) continue to have relationships that

¹⁰ But for some reason transsexuals do not wish to attend sessions specifically for Muslim women, whereas they do wish to attend a session on the torture of lesbians.

¹¹ As former British colonies, Australia and India share many social, political and cultural institutions and past times (such as cricket!). I accept, however, that the pressures to marry in India are greater than they are in Australia. What was not problematic to them, but equally Western, was their psychiatric and social work theoretical models. It is as Giti Thadani (1996) points out, an issue of political expediency to constantly cite the problem as contamination by Western culture. India, as her research shows, has a very long tradition of lesbian culture stretching back many thousands of years.

¹² FTM refers to Female to Male transsexual; MTF is used for Male to Female transsexual.

appear heterosexual thereby accruing heterosexual privilege; when transsexuals who have grown up as men want access to spaces which have been hard won by women-born lesbians.¹³ Putting it simply, when transsexuals do not take responsibility for their own political decisions and campaigns, but in one way or another decide to ride on the backs of women's and lesbians' organizations.

A woman from France says, we should move on and not have the conversation monopolised by the rupture, and so I begin again. But the atmosphere has changed. It has changed utterly, from one of openness to one of fragility.

What comes out of the session?

One participant who works for a lesbian and bisexual women's network in the state of Kerala speaks about two women in Kerala whose house has been burnt down because they are living as lesbians. She also speaks of two policewomen, one of whom was sacked from her job and later married.¹⁴

An Iranian woman comes in and I ask her a few questions about the situation of lesbians in Iran.¹⁵ She talks about the punishment of lesbians, in particular the flogging. She stays only a short time in the meeting, and soon leaves after saying that she is not a lesbian.

Deepa Nair, a lawyer, then talks about Section 377 and the efforts being made to repeal the law. She says that it does not specifically target lesbians, but is sometimes used to prosecute lesbians for unnatural acts (Voices Against Section 377 ND: 31-2).¹⁶

Ellen Woodsworth, an out Vancouver City Councillor, speaks about the silencing of lesbians and how hard it is to work politically in the left and to raise lesbian issues. She points out that when she travels to Cuba she has to remain silent.

Two women from Jagori, a New Delhi-based women's group, come in selling calendars with photographs by Giti Thadani. Several women express interest in purchasing them and the group slowly dissipates. Nevertheless, it seems a fitting end in some ways. At least it has finished with lesbian-centred images by one of India's most radical lesbian theorists.

We all go our separate ways. The workshop has, in my eyes, failed to meet any of my expectations. Possibly those expectations have been too high. Worst of all is the sense that even greater division has been created through the workshop: divisions between

¹³ This is familiar territory for many lesbians who have been activists over the last couple of decades. There are countless examples of this in the U.S.A. and Australia, and I have seen the destructive nature of transsexual and transgender interventions in lesbian and feminist organizations (Hawthorne 2003c).

¹⁴ See Thadani who writes about violence against lesbians and lesbian suicide (1996:101-105), and Sharma who writes about underprivileged lesbians in India and the "many silences that fall in between the uttered and the unutterable" (2006:104).

¹⁵ Monika Reinfelder notes that in 1990 the German government granted asylum to an Iranian lesbian "who would have faced the death penalty had she been forced to return to Iran" (1996: 18). Reinfelder also writes that in Iran, the methods of execution are cruel and painful "hanging, stoning, being thrown off a cliff or high building, or facing a firing squad" (Reinfelder 1996: 12). Other reports indicate that lesbians "have been beheaded or stoned to death" (Reinfelder 1996: 12).

¹⁶ The problem of invisibility of lesbians in India is indicated by the omission of the word lesbian from the glossary of an otherwise useful handbook, *A Guide to Your Rights: Legal Handbook for Sexual Minorities in India*. The glossary does include bisexual, homosexual and transgender. I point out, however, that this is not exclusive to Indian organizations as the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) in the U.S.A. in 2005 had precisely the same kind of omission from its list of keywords for conference presentations. The keyword list included Sexuality, the Body, Identity, Homosexuality and Transgender, but not Lesbian.

heterosexuals and lesbians with entirely different worldviews; divisions between lesbians caused by unthinking inclusivity. And yet worse again, that these divisions have sidelined the reason for the workshop and no network, no connections between lesbians pursuing matters of social justice have been achieved. I cannot decide if the failure is mine, or in part caused by the bad scheduling, or whether it is an inevitable part of working in an environment where too many very different political agendas are competing for the impossibly small space for lesbians in the world for justice.

After the Workshop

Two days later, I attend a popular session on “Sexuality, Nationalism and Fundamentalism”. It seems a promising topic. It includes a series of speakers from several countries, women and men, *hijras*¹⁷ and gays, heterosexuals and queers. If any speaker is a lesbian she does not say that in her introduction. After an hour in the room, I have heard the word lesbian used only once and negatively: *lesbian dogma*. I rise to speak and suggest that lesbians are severely under threat. That the silence around lesbian existence, the putting down of lesbians is happening at the same time as queer is becoming fashionable. I agree with one speaker who says that the rape of gay men is a crime. But I go on to say that lesbians are tortured in countries all around the world; that lesbians are raped in an attempt to heterosexualize them. I point out that lesbians have become a litmus test for freedom. Until heterosexuals and queers see the torture of lesbians as an important social issue, I despair that another world really is possible.

No one responds to my challenge. The same speaker who has raised the issue of the rape of gay men ends her talk by saying that “Gender allows us to escape from our bodies.”

Gender is a complex issue and the desire to escape from our bodies strikes me as a very strange response. A number of lesbians talk to me at the end of the session, one of whom is wearing a T-shirt with a great slogan: *Heterosexuality isn't normal – just common*.

The visibility of queers and transsexuals at the WSF is considerably higher than that of lesbians. There is a march later the same day where protestors carry banners claiming that hijras are women. But as an Indian lesbian sitting beside me says, “They are also men. Why aren't they claiming that? And why do they insist on dressing in ways that stereotype the worst aspects of femininity?”

Here perhaps is a core issue: what is the relationship between the social and cultural development of women and men and the bodily experiences of women and men?

How Lesbians Are Relevant

As a lesbian, I experience my body socially in very different ways from my heterosexual women friends. Only this week I attended a wedding in which, in spite of the mother of the bride's efforts to equalize many aspects of the ceremony, heterosexual culture—its social, political and bodily expressions of heterosexuality—was highly visible. As a lesbian, I have consciously resisted heterosexual norms and, even if I sometimes fail, on a day-to-day basis my way of moving, walking and *not* using my hair, neck, eyelids or mouth to attract men is a challenge to heteronormative behavior. As a

¹⁷ *Hijras* have played a social role in India for many years. Traditionally *hijras* are eunuch men. These days the definition of *hijra* is broader and includes men who are gay, transsexual, transgender or transvestite.

feminist, my thirty-year project – personal and political – is to inhabit my body with love. To claim that gender allows us to escape our bodies is just one more move away from engagement and connection with oneself and others. Indeed, it could be called a form of hatred.

The Mumbai World Social Forum's slogan, *Another world is possible*, had given me some hope that the worlds on offer would not be vying with one another for greater space. I had hoped that even if lesbian sessions were not in the larger venues, that they would be given the space due to any oppressed group who remain subject to the harshest kind of discrimination, imprisonment, and the death penalty simply for existing.¹⁸

However, lesbians were not only marginalized physically and politically, but also because of a kind of inclusivity that continues to screen out lesbian existence. I am referring here to the invisibilizing that happens under the rubric of terms such as queer, sexual minorities, LGBTI, transgender, same sex, homosexual, diverse sexualities, and non-conforming sexualities. There is a need to be able to speak about sexuality in broad forums as suggested by these terms, but there remains the continuing need to highlight the ways in which different sexualities defy the hegemonic ideology. Lesbians resist the dominant hegemonic position in multiple ways and to that extent marginalization occurs whenever an all-encompassing term is used.

The reaction against lesbians—and I mean specifically lesbians—is a deep one. It represents a fear that the mainstream has—and here I would include in the mainstream the political parties left and right, churches, media—of what the reality of a lesbian life means. A lesbian life, whether lived in silence or in outspoken rebelliousness, remains a challenge to the male-dominated, male-defined political and social system. Lesbians are like escapees. Even those who present as business women or mothers of growing children or as Unitarian ministers or some other acceptable face of the straight capitalist white-dominated society create a ripple that whispers: *these women can do it on their own*. What if more women got uppity and decided that they too would no longer participate in that part of the social structure, what fear among men would this create? The implications are economic independence (even if it means poverty) for lesbians; it means no one to look after life's details – housework, child-rearing, emotional support, and more; it means challenging the supremacy of global masculine entertainments such as sport and sexual exploitation; it means questioning a violence-based social structure that allows armaments trading, nuclear proliferation, and unnecessary and illegal wars.

As Monique Wittig has written:

Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation (“forced residence,” domestic corvée, conjugal duties, unlimited production of children, etc.), a relation

¹⁸ Of course, gay men are also subjected to these punishments and I support every effort to abolish punishment of gay men on the same basis. But when research is pursued, or when there are campaigns for Gay rights or rights of sexual minorities, it is lesbians who are rendered invisible.

which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual (1992: 20).

Taking lesbians seriously as a group in need of social justice campaigns requires rethinking—as Wittig demands—the “categories of sex” (Wittig 1992: 20). It means recognizing the relationships between “women” who might be lesbians. *It will entail entertaining the thought that the economic, political and ideological relationship between the subjects (women/lesbians) might be more important than a nearby male.* Or as Jeffner Allen puts it:

...if we are to live in an economy in which we can be free, we must disband the heterosexual grid (Allen 1996: 63).

This confronting challenge to patriarchal “naturalism” is a clue to the reason behind lesbians being so forcefully punished under patriarchy. The very existence of lesbians is a challenge to the rights of men as a group who have assumed rights of property and person over women. It challenges the assumption that there is something natural about the categories of women and men, and it suggests that there is an alternative to those naturalized categories. It challenges men’s proprietorial ownership of the category *women* in a way that is reminiscent of the challenge posed by Native Land Rights of Indigenous peoples (Hawthorne 2002). Native Title challenges an assumption of private property which is rarely challenged these days. Heterosexuality is similarly ingrained in the political landscape so that a Peruvian lesbian can say:

When I speak of my right to my own culture and language as an indigenous woman, everyone agrees to my self-determination. But when I speak of my other identity, my lesbian identity, my right to love, to determine my own sexuality, no one wants to listen (*ILIS Newsletter* 1994: 13).

It is this distancing of political support from others, who may well deem themselves progressive, that is a feature of lesbian existence. Lesbians have joined with a host of others in supporting and fighting for political and social rights, but often when lesbians ask for support for their own cause, the lack of response indicates that “Only other dykes are proud of dykes” (Hanscombe 1992).

The kind of marginalization that occurred at the Mumbai WSF is not always readily spotted from programs and locations, but both B42 and C85 were located at the far edges of the grounds and in very small rooms. I have to assume it was unintentional, that they were scheduled simultaneously, but when such outcomes occur, a certain level of defensive paranoia arises and you ask, “Is this an accident?” Or is it the usual unthinking Dominant Culture Stupidity,¹⁹ an assumption that lesbian experience, knowledge and political movements are simply not very important. On cross-checking these locations, the only pattern that suggests itself is that many of the sessions in these rooms were small locally-oriented groups.

¹⁹ This is a term I use in Hawthorne (2002: 47). It refers to the difficulty that the dominant group (in this case heterosexuals, both women and men) has in seeing the knowledge of the marginalized.

World Social Forum, Nairobi, Kenya 2007

What are the implications of these events for future social forums? The regional social forums I have attended in Australia (Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne) and in Aoteroa/New Zealand (Wellington) were no more or less astute in their organizing around: a) sexuality and sexual orientation and: b) lesbians. Indeed, it is so reminiscent of political activity among left-leaning politicians in the early 1970s, that I wonder whether the women's movement has had any impact at all on the minds of men and whether the lesbian and gay movements have had any impact on heterosexuals. I have no doubt that Indigenous peoples, Blacks, and others who do not fit the Anglo-European Caucasian "norm" must be asking the same question.

When the forum goes to Africa, the issue of violence against lesbians is particularly important. Africa has both the best laws around sexual orientation, and some of the worst abuses. In South Africa, there is constitutional protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In spite of the constitutional protection, lesbians experience the same kind of invisibilization and marginalization as I have discussed above (Morgan and Wieringa 2005).

More worrying is that political leaders in different parts of Africa have attacked lesbians and gays verbally. This is the case in Zimbabwe, Namibia, Kenya, and Uganda (Morgan and Wieringa 2005; Hawthorne 2006). My own research on the torture of lesbians began after a Ugandan lesbian warned me that lesbians in her country and in neighbouring countries are being tortured. There are first-hand accounts of torture of lesbians in Uganda and Zimbabwe. African countries where being a lesbian carries an immediate jail sentence include Algeria, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Tunisia. In others, death is the penalty. This is the case in Sudan, northern Nigeria, Mauritania, Qatar, and Yemen (Amnesty International 1997, 77-90). On September 29, 2004, FannyAnn Eddy was found dead after being repeatedly raped. She had been working in the offices of the Sierra Leone Lesbian and Gay Association (*Human Rights Watch*, 4 October 2004, cited in Morgan and Wieringa 2005: 20).

Less than a year before her death, FannyAnn Eddy had this to say:

Silence creates vulnerability. You, members of the Commission on Human Rights, can break the silence. You can acknowledge that we exist, throughout Africa and on every continent, and that human rights violations based on sexual orientation or gender identity are committed every day. You can help us combat those violations and achieve our full rights and freedoms, in every society, including my beloved Sierra Leone (Eddy 2004).

I would commend to the organizers of future World Social Forums a stream that highlights discrimination against lesbians, and another broader stream of issues of sexuality. I would stress that heterosexuality be included in these discussions rather than what is euphemistically called sexual minorities. But on reading the latest information about the 2007 World Social Forum. I find the following principles enunciated:

1. Building a world of peace, justice, ethics and respect for diverse spiritualities;

2. Liberating the world from the domination of multinational and financial capital;
3. Ensuring universal and sustainable access to the common goods of humanity and nature;
4. Democratization of knowledge and information;
5. Ensuring dignity, defending diversity, guaranteeing gender equality and eliminating all forms of discrimination;
6. Guaranteeing economic, social, human and cultural rights especially the right to food, healthcare, education, housing, employment and decent work;
7. Building a world order based on sovereignty, self-determination and rights of peoples;
8. Constructing a people-centred and sustainable economy;
9. Building real democratic political structures and institutions with full people's participation on decisions and control of public affairs and resources ([WSF_bulletin] WSF Bulletin - October 25, 2006).

This list does not give me hope. I hope that as the World Social Forum travels around the world, as it journeys into Africa, as it opens up discussion on a host of issues from poverty to water to violence against women to militarization and globalization, I fruitlessly hope that the words of FannyAnn Eddy and those of lesbians tortured wherever they live would not be silenced. But I fear that they will continue to be. Lesbians right now need political support and awareness of the impact of hate and vilification. In the long run, the planet might well need lesbians.

Bibliography

- Allen, Jeffner. 1996). "Lesbian Economics". In *Sinuosities: Lesbian Poetic Politics*. Indiana University Press. First published in *Trivia* (1986).
- Amnesty International. 1997. *Breaking the Silence: Human rights violations based on sexual orientation*, London: Amnesty International United Kingdom.
- BOLETIM FSM. 2006. WSF Bulletin, October 25.
- Caleri (Campaign for Lesbian Rights). 1999. *Khamosh! Emergency Jari Hai! Lesbian Emergence: A Citizens' Report*. Caleri: New Delhi.
- Eddy, FannyAnn. 2004. "Testimony by FannyAnn Eddy at the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. Item 14 – 60th Session, U.N. Commission on Human Rights." <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/10/04/sierra9439.htm>
- Hanscombe, Gillian. 1991. "In Among the Market Forces." In Judith Barrington (Ed.) *An Intimate Wilderness: Lesbian Writers on Sexuality*. Portland, OR: The Eighth Mountain Press.
- Hanscombe, Gillian. 1992. *Sybil: The Glide of Her Tongue*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Hawthorne, Susan. 2002. *Wild Politics: Feminism, Globalisation and Bio/diversity*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Hawthorne, Susan. 2003a. "From The Lesbian Body to Same-Sex Attracted: The Depoliticising of Lesbian Culture." *Hecate*, Vol. 29, No. 2: 235-247.
- Hawthorne, Susan. 2003b. "Research and Silence: Why the Torture of Lesbians is so Invisible." New Zealand Women's Studies Conference, Palmerston North, NZ. 22 November.
- Hawthorne, Susan. 2003c. "Lesfest – The case for exclusion." *Lesbiana*, October, p. 5.

- Hawthorne, Susan. 2005a. "India Sutra" in *The Butterfly Effect*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Hawthorne, Susan. 2005b. "Unstopped Mouths" in *The Butterfly Effect*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Hawthorne, Susan. 2006. "Ancient Hatred and its Contemporary Manifestation: The Torture of Lesbians." *The Journal of Hate Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1: 33-58.
- Hawthorne, Susan and Bronwyn Winter (Eds.). 2002. *September 11, 2001: Feminist Perspectives*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- ILIS Newsletter* 15 (2) 1994.
- Kelly, Jennifer. 2005. *Zest for Life: Lesbians' Experiences of Menopause*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Morgan, Ruth and Saskia Wieringa. 2005. *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female same-sex practices in Africa*. Johannesburg: Jacana.
- Namjoshi, Suniti. 1993a. *Feminist Fables*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Namjoshi, Suniti. 1993b. *St Suniti and the Dragon*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Namjoshi, Suniti. 1996. *Building Babel*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Namjoshi, Suniti. 2000. *Goja*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Reinfelder, Monika. 1996. "Persecution and Resistance." In Reinfelder, Monika (ed.) *Amazon to Zami: Toward a Global Lesbian Feminism*. London: Cassell: 11-29.
- Sangini (India) Trust. 2005. *A Guide to Your Rights: Legal Handbook for Sexual Minorities in India*. New Delhi: Sangini (India) Trust.
- Sharma, Maya. 2006. *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Underprivileged India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.
- Thadani, Giti. 1996. *Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India*. London: Cassell.
- Thadani, Giti. 2004. *Moebius Trip: Digressions from India's Highways*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Vanita, Ruth. 2005. *Gandhi's Tiger and Sita's Smile*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.
- Voices Against Section 377. n.d. *Rights For All: Ending Discrimination under Section 377*. New Delhi.
- Wittig Monique. (1980/1992). "One is Not Born a Woman". First published in French in 1980 in *Questions Feministes*, No. 8, and in English in 1981 in *Feminist Issues* Vol. 1, No. 2. It is included in her collection of essays, *The Straight Mind* (1992).