

Speech given at a public Wages for Housework event in Harlesden High Street, London-  
September, 1975

I've worked as a waitress in coffee houses and restaurants in Australia, and in a country town in England, and in London. I've worked in places where I wore jeans, flat shoes, and with my hair loose; where I wore a dress and frilly white pinny and high-heeled shoes, wasn't allowed to wear rings, had to tie my hair back and scrub my nails; and many places where I wore some variety of shapeless uniform that I had to keep clean and decent-looking. Some of the places are expensive, silver-service, same-posh coffee lounges, French Restaurants, cheap coffee lounges, and some in between. But I very soon found out that it makes no difference what sort of place it is, or what you wear - the work is always the same.

The work waitresses do is housework. And serving people food and drink is only part of it. A lot of it is making them feel good - so they can relax and enjoy their meal - and spend their money. We have to do this by looking nice - preferably sexy, but at least clean and tidy, with make-up; and being very subservient. We're very much at people's beck and call, and we have to be nice to everyone who comes in, regardless of how they treat us. Above all, waitresses have to SMILE and look as if we enjoy being forced to serve people and be subservient. Smiling is absolutely expected of us - it makes no difference how we might be feeling. I often feel like a "smiling machine" - I do it so often that it comes automatically - whether people are being nice or awful to me.

And what can keep us doing this is that we absolutely depend on our tips, because the wages we get are so low. The place I work in now is a big West End store, and I get paid 13 pounds a week for a 40-hour week. Obviously I can't live on that. - I have to make it up in tips. My survival depends on smiling and looking nice, and servicing

I feel like all my life is housework. I spend 8 hours a day at the restaurant serving people, always ~~xx~~ on public display as a sex object, always at someone else's beck and call. Then I come home and have a whole lot more housework to do - cooking meals, shopping, cleaning up after myself, doing my washing - which includes keeping white uniforms clean, and as white as possible - and I do all my washing by hand, because the laundrette near me costs 45 p.a machine, and on and on. All this work is work that I have to do so I can keep going out to work - and my employer is getting it all for 13 pounds a week.

As if all this wasn't enough work, there's my personal life, including my sex life, which is supposed to be relaxing and an escape from work. But we women know that when we have no time, or energy, or space, or money that even being with people is work too. And because I am a lesbian, some of the pressures on my personal life are different from those on women who are with men. Loving a man is hard work because of all the things that are expected of us as part of that loving - like washing his socks, doing his cleaning, always giving him emotional support, and a lot more besides. Women are always finding ways to cut down on that work - and as soon as we do, men call us lesbian. If we get too uppity, if we refuse to do the washing up, or want to go out on our own, or say no to them in bed, or think too highly of ourselves, they'll take us for lesbian, or we might even become lesbian. That is a pretty frightening threat, and they use it to keep us in line.

Lesbian women are saying that we don't want to do the work that goes with being with a man. But loving a woman is hard work too - though for different reasons. It's hard work because we're fighting what is supposed to be "natural", because we're always scared of people's reactions when we're in public, because we might lose our jobs, our children, our homes if people know; because we often have to keep quiet about our lives-- like we can't even say where we go dancing. Even though we're refusing some work, there is still a lot of work, housework, that we have to do - the same as all women. We are still all housewives.

Because of all the restrictions on the lives of all women, even our sex lives are not what we'd like them to be. They never live up to our hopes and dreams. We all talk about it among ourselves - though there is still a lot we don't know, that we're afraid to say, or to ask. Often we don't tell men how we feel, and they don't know very much



about what we think about sex; and we don't know very much about what they think about it either. We're often afraid to tell people how we feel, because we think the way we feel is the wrong way to feel; or we're told that it's the wrong way. As a lesbian I'm always being told that what I do sexually is unnatural or abnormal, that I'm not a "real" woman. But I know when I'm putting on my uniform and my make-up, and giving people their food, smiling all the while, that I'm just the same as all women who do that.

I'm sick of everything I do being housework - wherever I go and all the time - at home, at the restaurant, on the street, in bed. I'm sick of always serving people. I don't want to do all that work for free, and I don't want everything I do to be made into work by the conditions I'm forced to live in. I want to have some time and money and energy so I can live my life, so I can have the kinds of relationships that I want, and do the things that I want. That's why I want wages for housework - wages for every minute of my life that is made into work for other people, so that my life needn't be work any more.

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That was a speech I made at a public event that we held recently in Brent, as part of the wages for housework campaign. Though I spoke as a waitress and as a lesbian, I want now to concentrate on the particular significance of my speaking as a lesbian. On that day in Brent several women spoke about their different situations - as mothers, teachers, young people, factory workers, and about the struggles they are making in those situations. Each of these situations bring out different aspects of what is common to all of us - housework, and being housewives, and our struggle against that work and for money and time for ourselves. The struggle of lesbian women was seen in the context of all the struggles women are making. I was not speaking as an "exotic accident" or as someone asking for "equality" or "acceptance". I was speaking as a woman who's making a struggle for the same things as other women, and about the conditions under which I'm forced to live and struggle - which are conditions many women share. We all have too much work and no time or money, and there are a lot of women who're lesbians - some who're open about it, some who aren't, some who're too scared to admit it even to themselves, and some who would like to be but are scared by what that would mean.

The Wages for Housework campaign gave each of us the occasion and the power to speak about the struggles we're making and to spread and further these struggles. I had never before been able to speak publicly as a lesbian (on the street) and Harlsden High Street had never before been able to hear about the struggles lesbian women are making. That these two things could happen was due to the power of the campaign; they are also an important source of power to the campaign, because when lesbians are unable to speak and people are unable to hear about our struggles, it is a weakness for all women.

The campaign meant that I could speak about my situation and struggles as a lesbian, and not be heckled off the platform or met with hostility, or just ignored; and meant that people listened and understood. That's an indication of a certain level of power. It's a level of power that enabled me to come out as a lesbian in the first place - which I did only recently. As that level of power increases, more and more women will feel able to come out, and by doing that, will drastically change what it means to be a lesbian. More lesbians means less isolation and more power, and will mean a blurring of the distinctions between lesbianism and heterosexuality - we won't be freaks any more.

Speaking publicly as a lesbian woman means power to lesbian women hearing it because they can see that I can do it, and they can see the reaction to it, and know that that's a level of power that they can use, to come out of the closet, to fight back against the conditions of their lives that cripple all of us. It means power to straight women hearing it because if there's a woman on the street refusing the work of relating to a man altogether, it gives her the power to refuse some more of that work. Women are always struggling over the terms of their relationships with men, and this is an additional source of strength - (the men they're with have to count themselves lucky for what they've got.)



At that event in Harlesden, and in the book, where there are two articles by lesbian groups here and in Canada, we have connected the struggles of lesbian women with the struggles of other women. When we organize with other women to win what we all need, we're refusing to be used as a threat, to be isolated and divided - and that refusal is a source of power for all women.

Because of the Wages for Housework Campaign, there is now a group of lesbian women in the Power of Women Collective who're organising as lesbians. There is also a lesbian group in the Wages for Housework Movement in Canada, a group which has been going for some time. Our group came together after the International Wages for Housework Conference in London in July. We were able to use that occasion to give us the power to get together. We want to continue to bring to this campaign the power of the struggles we're making as lesbians; and we want to continue to use the power of the campaign to give power to these struggles. We know that that is the only way we can build our power and the power of all women, that will enable us to win what we all need and want; less work, more money, and more time for ourselves.

Anne Neale W.D. Jordan

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I want to say some things about coming out and what that meant to me. It wasn't a question of deciding "I will be a lesbian", or "I won't be", or "I want/don't want to be"- it was a question of how I increasingly felt about my relationships with men, and my life as a whole, and what was possible. For a long time, being a lesbian was not possible. I was feeling more and more alienated from men - the biggest problem was the schizophrenia in my life between living and working and organising with women, but having sexual relationships with men. I found it more and more difficult to have close emotional relationships with them - it always seemed like a lot of work with low returns; and it was just very hard to bridge the gap between what I was doing in the rest of my life, and my relationship with the particular man/men. As it became more difficult, I preferred to have "just" sexual relationships with them - that wasn't as much work and emotional energy as an emotional relationship as well; and the only way I could manage was to keep that relationship quite separate from the rest of my life - though that meant an increase in schizophrenia. It meant a very big split between my "sexual" life and the rest of my life - that was pretty intolerable, but the only way I could manage it. Even so, it gave me a higher degree of control than I'd had in relationships with men before, and I enjoyed the fucking a lot - more than in some relationships where I'd been emotionally involved as well.

Which doesn't mean that everything sexually was roses - far from it. I always felt sexually insecure with men - as if the whole thing was a performance (and endurance) test, and I had to "produce the goods" - i.e. the exciting adventurous novel kind of fucking that masquerades as "liberated", plus the orgasms (mine - his were usually not a problem). I found both pretty hard - and got quite good at taking the latter and pleading "unliberated" to get out of some work. After a while I expected the same from them too, and if their "performance" was not up to par (= enjoyable) I often felt disinclined to continue and often didn't, because trying to fix it all up seemed like too much work (again!) There are obvious limitations when you're relating to someone on that basis - but that's some of the cost of the refusal of some work. With a few men who I really liked and trusted, it wasn't like that, but then there was never enough time and space to be able to talk about it, and relax and stop feeling pressurized to perform, etc.

The main problem was what it meant to be a lesbian. Before the campaign, for wages for housework, and the existence of wages due in Canada, being a lesbian meant either being in the closet, or in the "straight" gay scene - bars, butch-femme role playing etc, underground, or being a separatist. As I was already in the closet, that left the other two. I didn't feel I could relate to the "straight" gay scene, because I didn't want to be a "man" and being a woman was enough of a problem without trying to be submissive and feminine for another woman acting like a man; and it wasn't a feminist situation.



I know I couldn't be like the separatists, and when I just got involved in the womens liberation movement I felt intimidated by them. I didn't want to cut my hair and wear jeans and jackets and be a "big strong dyke". I didn't want to change my life style and live in a ghetto, surrounded by "pure" revolutionary lesbians, and be very isolated from other women. That would've meant that once I "became" a lesbian I'd be isolated from other people like me - as I was the day before, or whenever, and I didn't want to be isolated from me. When I stopped feeling intimidated by them, I felt even more that I didn't want to be part of that strategy. So it looked like if I didn't see my interests as separate from those of all women, and wanted to organise with other women, and wanted to get power from their struggles and have mine be a power to theirs; let alone if I wanted to live with women who may or may not be lesbian and wanted to have long hair and wear jewellery and skirts or whatever, that I couldn't be a lesbian.

But things were happening that made it all seem more possible (both the actual sleeping with a woman, and being a lesbian). A going away party and us both being very drunk certainly helped the actual event! What mattered more in terms of being a lesbian was the campaign for wages for housework and the existence of Wages Due in Canada, and the beginnings of a group here. That meant that it was possible to be a lesbian without being in the "straight" gay scene or being a separatist, and without having to keep quiet about it in a "straight" group. The existence of the campaign meant that the struggles of lesbians would be seen to be connected to the struggles of all women and that their struggles would give power to those of all women, and vice versa. It meant that by organising together, we would be breaking down the divisions between lesbian and straight women and breaking down the isolation of lesbian women.

It was the level of power of the campaign, (that the lesbian groups here and in Canada are indications of) that made it possible for me to come out. That doesn't mean that it was easy to do, or that it's easy now. It wasn't and it isn't. But at least I feel less schizophrenic about my life and my sexuality and my close emotional relationships aren't so cut off from the rest of my life - though having them all tied up together has its distinct disadvantages too - because it means there's no escape from either! And though our relationships are always hard work, I've found some joy and strength from them too.

Having come out, it was again the power of the campaign and Wages Due that made it possible for me, and some others, to publicly appear as lesbians for the first time, at the international wages for housework conference in July. The lesbian women in Power of Women were able to use the power of that occasion and the presence of some of Wages Due, Canada, to get together as Wages Due London. And it is the continuing power of the campaign that makes it possible by providing the occasion and the power for us to speak publicly. At public meetings and on the street, as lesbians - and by doing so giving power to all women - lesbian and straight, and to the campaign. As our power and the power of the campaign increase more and more becomes possible - for all women.

P.S. Haven't gone into lesbian relationships and what it's been like for me, being "out", 'cos I wanted to concentrate on coming out. More to follow...

Anne Male