

Exploring new ways of insubmission in social representation

Feminist Lesbians Group (Grup Lesbianes Feministes)



Abstract And Bio

The Feminist Lesbians Group self-representation is that of a political action group with an anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalistic approach, positioned purposely on the fringe and working on activist research based on analysis from lesbianism and feminism. In fighting against the invisibility that lesbians, feminists and women overall are still suffering, the GLF (Feminist Lesbians Group) wants to actively participate in processes of social representation, undoing and denouncing control mechanisms and inventing new practices that put in question the dominant social and gender establishment. Currently, our political action is built around the following question: how does capitalism and the patriarchal system "produce" ourselves as individuals / subjects (related to sexual, social and affection relations, related to leisure, related to social transformation). From that positioning, we have been developing a series of actions occupying the public space and interacting with people in the streets in different ways. E.g., we have created actions to raise a critical conscience in front of the dominant ghettification represented by the Gaixample area (Pink posters with the warning "you are entering a controlled area"), but also in front of the appropriation of the social movement messaging that political institutions perform. These actions (that will be described further in this text) try to scenify the lines of thought mentioned above and to generate visibility for reading reality from an alternative open-minded perspective.

Keywords: *Feminism, lesbianism, antipatriarcal resistance, activism, new social rights.*

Having the opportunity to collaborate to a monograph about feminisms and activisms we are really happy to share with you some of our political statements in order to contribute to the debate on new forms of activism and on the impact and role of lesbian activism inside feminism.

The Barcelona Feminist Lesbians Group self-representation is that of a political action group with an anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalistic approach. We intentionally position ourselves on the fringe and do work on activist research, based on analysis crossing over from lesbianism and feminism. By fighting against the invisibility that lesbians, feminists and women overall are still suffering, the Feminist Lesbians Group wants to participate actively in processes of

social representation, in the undoing and denouncing of control mechanisms and seeks to propose new practices that put in question the dominant social and gender establishment.

"Who we are and what we want!"

The *Grup de Lesbianes Feministes* de Barcelona (GLF) – Feminist Lesbians Group – was constituted in 1986 by lesbians who were involved in the feminist movement but lacked their own and specific political space for debate and action. It is a political action group and as such was a pioneer lesbian group in Catalonia and even in Spain, where lesbians are scarcely visible and appear almost exclusively in mixed organisations with gay-male political priorities that are far from aimed at a feminist perspective. From the start our characteristic aim has been the conjunction of a very engaged feminism and lesbianism with a political activist approach. This particularity makes it different from mainstream feminist and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi- and Transsexual) groups in Spain. This dual adscription has also marked our evolution, resulting in a series of materials and actions that were first pursuing mostly issues of visibility for lesbians from a feminist anti-patriarchal perspective and more recently, also aiming to team up with other social activists for a change in all conditions that make life precarious. So this is a critical analysis of how civil rights, caring duties and personal relations are structured, a debate that affects the social model as a whole. At present we promote an exchange of knowledge with social activists that support a new conception of social relationships for everyone (beyond sex-gender labels), and who are trying to spread this broader and critical feminist perspective inside the LGBT movement. We will give a more detailed account of this perspective later on.

Currently the Feminist Lesbians Group political action is built around the question: how do capitalism and the patriarchal system "produce" ourselves as individuals / subjects? (i.e. related to sexual, social and affection relations, related to leisure, related to social transformation etc.). This question does not refer to the patriarchal order in an abstract way, but is addressed in order to analyse different aspects of daily life that are shaped under hetero-patriarchal guidelines (personal relations balance, authority/power assignation, public space distribution in cities, etc.) and to elaborate on valid propositions to change these conditions or at least to counterbalance their impact on the individual and collective choice for a life model.

Firstly, we criticize the regulation of identities and desire, that is strengthened by the recent commercialisation and institutionalisation of "the lesbian fact". The gay community clearly appears to be a new target for politicians and merchants. Lesbians are an emergently significant group for them, so they try to appeal to women in particular and thereby make lesbian women visible in a very problematic way. In an anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalistic fight, we as feminist lesbians don't want to be represented socially by gay-business owners, who are holders of what we call the *pink money* interests (where "pink" refers to "gay") and that picture gays/lesbians as a purely commercial and trendy niche market. We do not even claim any right over a theoretical "pink-share" that governments of all kinds may use to (dis)integrate our vindications. Because our main preoccupation is to unveil and disable the different ways in which identities and emergent sexual relations are controlled and classified. We are concerned about all strategies addressed to control anyone's life.

Secondly, we do not want to adjust to the heterosexist rule, and thus we propose a daily and microscopic subversion into social relations of power via new practices in (emotional?) affective and sexual relationships. Our group put in question how the equality of rights seems to be interpreted currently. For example, we propose a critical view in the debate about homosexual marriage. This is the main political claim made by the LGBT: is marriage such a desirable institution, is it one that fits in with the kind of relations we want to establish? Does it cover our needs for gender transformation, for change in social relations? We question marriage because it is an institution that reinforces the dominant social gender relations – e.g. the duties to care for kids and the elderly are still mainly women's competence according to the unspoken, accepted rules of marriage; and besides that, we think that marriage cannot be presented as the all-in-one generator of rights. In our opinion, it is not a solution for the lack of rights gays and lesbians suffer but merely a structure imported from heterosexist societies, where it is already going through a crisis. For that reason we advocate for a system in which individuals are granted different rights depending on their situation and not necessarily limited or resulting from couple relationships. Marriage as a "pre-set rights/duties package" that legitimates a full network of existing structures and institutions that reinforce the capitalistic and patriarchal social pattern, perpetuating the dominant social, economical and gender relationships. Instead we envision "gender" and "sex" as evolving concepts, agents for a social transformation that grows from the ground level upwards. Thus, we do not want to be "normalised" lesbians who fit in with some pre-approved stereotypes that neo-liberal governments accept for us to be tolerable. Together with other social movements, we stand against any structure, any pattern that leads to a precarisation of our lives using many forms of violence; the challenge is to transform personal relations, not to make them uniform.

Third and finally, in a society like ours, where culture and identities become new items for a commercial exchange, we do NOT want to be produced as consumer-market subjects. Moreover, we are concerned about the existing restrictions to spot, promote or create spaces to generate contra-hegemonic practices from gays, lesbians, bi and transgender. To turn the rules of the hetero-patriarchal social order upside down, there is a need to set up spaces where alternative relations flow and a need to increase participation in institutions and in the public space. Particularly, the public space should be vindicated as political space for collective creativity based on new forms of social, sexual and affective relations. By speaking against life models imposed by pressure groups that present a wonderland for gays, lesbians and transsexual men and women, we want to liberate ourselves on the streets, transforming them at the same time.

Our Practices

From this position, we have developed a series of actions occupying the public space and interacting with people in the streets in different ways. Achievements have neither been easy nor fast in many cases. Since 1999, the GLF campaigned for "A street for the lesbian women", denouncing that many streets in Barcelona are dedicated to famous writers, doctors, scientists, philosophers, mainly men; not a single one is dedicated to a lesbian and thus our contribution to history becomes

invisible and thereby our lives symbolically cease to exist in the public space. Lobbying techniques ranged from actions in the street (sticking names of famous lesbians to the street signs) to exhibitions and publishing of materials; this continued every year until 2004, when Barcelona had finally named a street after Sappho, a major Greek poet.

Regarding the debate about homosexual marriage, it is good to know that, for the first time in Spain, in 1998 the Catalan government passed a law regulating *de facto* (non-married) stable couples, which includes same-sex couples and gives them the same rights as married people although it employees rules differently from the ones applicable for heterosexual couples. The internal debate started, and the GLF approached issues that make the women perspective visible beyond legally recognized couple relations, which are traditionally presented as a first step to creating a family. So we published a brochure titled *De fet, les parelles*¹ – criticizing civil marriage, and in 2001 a brochure about auto-insemination (*I ara volem ser mares!*)² – And now we want to become mothers !?) was published to raise conscience about the fact that lesbians are women and therefore can create a family on their own surpassing most of the barriers society imposes (limited access to artificial insemination and ineffective access to adoption for lesbians are the rule in Spain). In 2002, the GLF participated in the European Social Forum that took place in Florence, Italy, with a critical view on the gay-business power (documented as “Pink without Frontiers”³) and afterwards published “Beyond marriage”⁴, a divulgative brochure on theories that explore marriage pros and cons and started campaigning “For the abolition of Civil Marriage”, a solution to clean up the patriarchal setting represented by marriage. The abolition of civil marriage would open the way to a landscape in which personal relations are based on mutual consent and contracts that reflect a new balance in terms of individual powers and rights, shaping models that fit each individual situation.

From that date, the abolition of civil marriage and the questioning of “gay marriage” was the basis of a complete line of actions from the GLF, including disruptive contributions like the proposal to declare February 14th as International Day for the Abolition of Marriage in the Women Assembly to be held in London for the European Social Forum. This date was suggested to substitute the commercial invention around St Valentine’s Day (known in Spain as “The Lover’s Day”). Other activist groups in Barcelona have joined in supporting these lines of thought from different gay, lesbian and transgender perspectives and against the claims made by mainstream LGBT groups who are closer to the dominant political circles. Those joint activities included performing the liberation of a bride by a “GayMatrix” commando in *Parc de la Ciutadella*, a park where the Catalan Parliament (the representation of the people’s will, in a democracy) is located.

More recently, the organisation of the Forum of Cultures in Barcelona gave pave to new and reinforced alliances with other alternative feminist groups not related to the GLTB movement.

¹That is a linguistic Catalan joke. It means “In fact, couples” joking with the *couple of fact* legislation.

²You can find it at <http://www.lesbifem.org/textos/mares.html>

³http://www.lesbifem.org/textos/RSF/RSF_ENG.html

⁴http://www.lesbifem.org/textos/matrimoni/matrimoni_ENG.html

The Forum was presented to the world as a big event promoting Diversity, Sustainability and Peace through a series of high-level conferences, parties, concerts and other cultural events during several months (from May to September 2004), which was based in the always-fashionable and cross-cultural city of Barcelona. The reality was that participants were sourced from a pool of internationally established and well known people in order to profile the event, rather than from the independent associations that work on diversity issues. For example a Women Forum was organized neglecting the main women organizations in Barcelona, but looking for support from abroad. The reality the Barcelona citizens experienced was a general disinformation about the cost and real benefits the Forum will produce. Besides, whereas the Forum location was built in one of the most deprived areas of Barcelona city and temporarily generated employment, all long-term investments were for building a Congress Hall that enlarged Barcelona's capacity to host international events: an architectural island of luxury and efficiency right in front of the existing poverty. In short, the insights were that the event was shaped according to marketing needs to pay for one of the biggest real estate and territory operations in Barcelona's recent history. Social transformation acted as cover-up on the surface, wrapped with an obvious appropriation of Social Forums language but respecting none of the alternative movements' values. Local social movements were not considered at any point in the planning; entrance fees were extremely high and there was ample evidence that tourists rather than locals were the target of the event, which enraged a good part of the citizens. This was totally contradictory to using "culture dialogue" and "forum" as key words and many groups – including the GLF- reacted against the Forum of Cultures producing critical issues and websites. Some of these materials are still available online, visiting http://barcelona.indymedia.org/?lang=en_US or www.fotut2004.org.

The Forum used Diversity and Sustainability as mottos, and even included a Women's Forum in the program inviting well-known women artists, pacifists or politicians. Yet the Forum limited the topics and neglected a debate on female work precarisation, capitalism using female labour to absorb social care costs for free, or violence against women. The Feminist Lesbians Group networked with different women groups in order to produce a feminist-angled manifesto critical to a Forum of Cultures in which the so-called "Women's Forum" was featured as highlight while none of the relevant local women's associations had been invited. Our small network of women groups produced several visibility items underlining experiences and contacts from women that referred to different perspectives (anti-militarists, Catalan nationalists, lesbian feminists, etc), all acting from a common feminist background. Postcards, posters, online distribution of documents, and actions in the streets were organised to unveil the faked dialogue of cultures. Special effort was made to interact with people on the streets and to give them a space to express what they really thought of this imposed Forum.

One highlight of these actions was a "*Forum-matón feminista*" (this can be translated as "Feminist Forum-shot") that imitated photo booths: People, mostly women, who were shopping in their neighbourhood market were asked for their opinion about the Forum. Confronted with different sentences, they could choose one or propose a new sentence which they would then hold up while we could take a picture of them announcing to the world what they really thought about the

Forum. Among the most popular sentences were: "Dialogues take place in the market", "I am mother of two and have neither spare money nor time to attend the Forum", "Grandmothers can resist all", "Lesbians are not represented in the Forum", "Difference is not a circus", "The Forum markets our identities". During that action an old woman wrote this as a personal sentence⁵: "It's too hot to go to the Forum". Images from this action can be seen online, visiting <http://www.lesbifem.org/forummaton/index.htm>

In recent years, the Feminist Lesbians Group plans its actions according to an activist research perspective in which interaction with people and bilateral exchange goes along with internal and theoretical discussion. Along these lines, the occupation of the public space, the claim for our right to disagree and the proposition of new models has also been a central feature in our actions, which thus have not been limited to a fight inside the LGBT arena. Nevertheless, apart from building bridges to feminist groups outside lesbian circles and to other LGBT groups, the GLF has engaged in raising a critical conscience in the face of the dominant ghettofication. We believe that ghettos represent a lack of integration of a cultural or social group, which is tolerated only in a restricted and clearly identified area that has distinctly marked borders. In Barcelona the area known as *Gaixample*, the main gay area located in the very centre, plays this role (as the neighbourhood of *Chueca* does in Madrid). At this point in history most gay businesses are concentrated in these areas, yet why shouldn't the rest of the city be a safe place for gays and lesbians too, and why shouldn't any bar or discotheque should welcome them?! Our fight for LGBT visibility outside the ghetto and against the commercialisation of our identities was the basis for a new and complex action.

It was planned to generate visibility of the contradictions that result from an area that is portrayed as a "safe space" but in which some bars and discos ban those lesbians and gays from entering who do not fit in with the social stereotype of a gay person, yet welcome heterosexual girls that escort their glamorous gay friends (gym-addicted, fashionably dressed, and ready to spend a week's money in over-rated drinks). The purpose of the action was not to deny the right to socialize in that area, but to point out why people would restrict themselves to this area and why they conformed with the rules imposed. We interpret this as a mechanism of the pink business which operates by exclusion and control over the territory. The action plan consisted of two main parts: firstly, marking the perimeter of the *Gaixample* to make visible the wicked signification of an area where people are allowed to out rule heterosexism but only by complying to the pink-money rules. Secondly, and in order to find an excuse to interact with them, conducting an informal survey among gay people by moving into the area at peak hour, and to listen to their representation of the *Gaixample*.

In order to delimitate the area we hung pink posters showing a radioactivity symbol and a warning "YOU ARE ENTERING A CONTROLLED AREA: GAIXAMPLE" in different places along the streets that form the perimeter, drawing an imaginary circle. The radioactivity symbol refers to the danger and pollution as metaphorical concepts linked to the lives of gays and lesbians in transit

⁵ Reproduced with her permission.

within the city boundaries. On the bottom left-hand side of the poster some questions address those people passing by:

“Are you dressed in fashion?
Do you know the “in” places?
Do you have glamour?
Do you have a credit card?
If affirmative, you can visit our bars and
pick up your personal card as “normalised gay/lesbian”

At some point it seems that we were following the route of someone who was hanging posters that advertised one of the trendiest gay discos along the same streets. Hence sometimes our pink posters covered those showing a half-naked six-pack boy (un)dressed in red underwear, with his trousers down and decorated with euro bills down there. On those streets, where we hit first, we discovered later on that the undressed boy -in-red posters were covering our pink ones.

Later on, around midnight, we placed a table in front of one of the most popular bars in the gay area and close to other important ones. We displayed some gay magazines and “normalised gay” and “normalised lesbian” cards, shaped in credit card format. The pink background featured a radioactivity symbol on one side and a rainbow-police symbol on the other. We had done some brainstorming to produce questions intended to check on stereotypes and that provided us with an excuse to open a dialogue with people going out for a drink in the *Gaixample*. Questions range from asking if they go out as gays only in this area or if they also behave the same in other spots of the city, to checking some personal choices like mobile phones, transportation habits, couple relationship rules (open or closed relations), etc. Some of the stereotypes are confirmed by most people approached (the dress code auto-imposed to seem trendy enough, the need to have a last generation mobile to feel reassured, the special care on haircuts and physical appearance, ...) but a significant part of them also state that they do perform the role and behave and dress differently when they do not go out.

The women team from the Group opened a dialogue and explained that the action tries to raise a debate on our confinement to limited and controlled parts of the city, framing a specific public space that we didn't choose. When people were given the card, with the notice “this is the first card that is useless and says so”, they smiled and requested to have one even though they could see that it is for being a “normalised gay”. They got the idea of our action and saw the contradictions of this monitored freedom the *Gaixample* provides; they even seemed sympathetic to us. In contrast to that, during the time we spend conducting the action, different bodyguards from some of the gay bars located nearby came over repeatedly to ask if we were staying much longer. They stated that our occupying the public space (the street) must be illegal and we were warned that the police will be there every minute, as they had called them to come and check on our weird behaviour. We stayed firm, answering that we'll be happy to talk to the police and explained that we are neither interfering or causing trouble nor selling things, but in fact were conducting a survey for activist research. We spent some hours chatting with people but we could feel the control in the street mixed with the openness of ordinary people playing their gay role.

Conclusion

To turn the rules of the hetero-patriarchal social order upside down, we think there is a need to increase participation in institutions and in the public space. Particularly, the public space should be vindicated as a political space, open to everyone. Introducing sex and gender issues as social transformation factors is our main assignment, in which we hope to engage other social movements fighting for a new conception of citizen rights. Our experience with actions in the street has clearly been enriching and it has been a way to interact with people and to have first-hand feedback on our messages. In general, ordinary people have rarely reacted aggressively when confronted personally with our actions, whereas we received clearly aggressive responses from social control mechanisms. Even though activism in the street is sometimes striking and tough work, it gives us a broader perspective on the social ground we want to transform in order to develop new forms of relationships.

The actions described above only try to sample some of our lines of thought. Their main purpose, in all cases, would be to encourage debate and to establish new points of reference not only among activists but also among the general population. A debate that enables all of us ordinary people to see reality from an alternative open-minded perspective.

For more information, please, visit www.lesbifem.org or write to info@lesbifem.org or lesbifem@pangea.org