

Women's Day! International Women's Day! International Women's Day!

oiled paper to IUD's

motives in restricting birth control were couched in moralistic terms. "We were all brought up in the belief that society's interest in the foetus has always been humanitarian and moral. These are the motives of the individual woman with an unwanted pregnancy, but there is little evidence that lawmakers, secular or ecclesiastical, were guided by such concerns. Or if they were, their humanitarianism was accompanied by military ambition, economic greed, and the wish for religious aggrandizement."

The argument today for a return to reproductive choices, including the option of abortion, continues to be based on the economic, mental and physical capacity for women to raise children, as well as her right to choose what role she will play in society. While morality is not denied by pro-choice advocates, they point to statistics outlining the hardship women suffer from bearing more children than they can handle, or when they are unprepared for the role of mother.

For example, it is probable in Canada that an unmarried woman faces a bleak future if she decides to keep her child. In 1976 two-thirds of Canadian single-parent mothers under age 35 were living and raising their children under the poverty line.

Single women are not the only ones who may prefer to have an abortion. In 1976, 29,270 abortions were performed in Ontario, nearly 25 per cent of the birth rate that year.

The politics of birth control took a new turn with the advent of the pill. A number of barrier methods were taken out of the market as the less fussy, effective oral contraceptives soared in popularity. But then the adverse health effects of the pill became apparent.

Since the '70's, sales of the pill in the United States have dropped by more than 25 per cent. Drug companies continue to down-play the health implications of the pill, such as increased chance of heart attack and stroke, and "minor" effects of mild to severe depression suffered by 30 per cent of pill users.

In Canada, oral contraceptives rake in \$50 million a year in profits. It is self-evident

pharmaceutical companies do not make money on diaphragms, which are replaced only once a year, and cervical caps, replaced every two years.

But studies show barrier methods are highly effective, and far more healthy.

According to doctors Barbara and Gideon Seaman, the safest birth control method from the standpoint of health, is a barrier method backed up by the availability of abortion in case of failure.

"Contrary to popular myth, the diaphragm, if fitted and used properly, is more reliable than most IUDs (Intra-uterine device) or the mini-pill, and on a par with conventional medically dangerous oral contraceptives," the Seamans write in *Women and the Crisis in Sex Hormones*.

Both the diaphragm, the cervical cap and other barrier methods owe their renewed popularity to the efforts of paramedics and women's health groups seeking the availability of safer methods.

But progress is slow. A spermicidal condom developed in Germany took four years to make it through the bureaucracy to Canada. The diaphragm used to be available in three models to suit different women; now it is only available in two. The cervical cap used to be sold in Canada in two dozen sizes. Today it is not marketed by a single company.

Women obviously do not control birth control. Despite widespread interest in barrier methods, less than one per cent of research money into all aspects of reproduction and contraception in 1979, went to improve barrier methods.

While the profit motive keeps women on the pill, the sexist medical establishment keeps men off the pill. Although a male contraceptive pill already exists, the concept of changing male chemical make-up, with possible adverse side effects, for the sake of birth control, has not gained much publicity.

As women's groups pressure for more health information on birth control, they are breaking a path back to the time when women were in control of contraceptive decisions, and back to a preference for more natural, healthy methods.

Feminist health collectives are the good "witches" of our time.

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The type of arguments employed against lesbianism reveals an attitude that female bonding poses such a threat to our society that it must be constantly attacked. Is man's hold on women's affection so tenuous that it requires bolstering by legal and societal structures? Is it merely the fact that some women choose to love women which is threatening to a male-oriented culture? Or is it the model of affection and love that is embodied in lesbian culture itself that is threatening?

We cannot provide definitive answers to these questions, but we can provide our own understanding of what it means to be a lesbian in this society.

Lesbianism is both a point of departure and arrival. It is chosen by different women for different reasons, but what is common is a decision to identify ourselves with women emotionally, sexually and socially. For some women, the act of choosing occurs at one instant in time. For others, this choice is part of a difficult process taking many years to complete. The path leading to acceptance of love for women is unique in every lesbian's life. Choosing the name "lesbian" may be the validation for something that has always existed - an underlying identification with women and a commitment to them. Loving a particular woman may then bring awareness of a new sexuality to light. In some cases, it may be the feminist community which initially allowed the expression of physical love for another woman. For other women, their sexual feelings towards women were apparent to them long before the discovery of a lesbian or feminist community.

The decision to love women is made not once, but constantly. Each day lesbians

struggle to define themselves rather than submit to the socially-imposed definitions.

These spring from two sources: the existence of lesbianism is overlooked or caricatured, not only by the dominant culture but also by the gay male subculture.

Heterosexual culture assumes that gay and lesbian lifestyles are similar, but as women's lives are different from men's, so are lesbians different from gay men. Because lesbians have been socialized as women and gay men as men, it is our belief that lesbians have more in common with women, regardless of their sexual orientation, than with the gay male community.

There are differences in the issues that concern gay men and lesbians. Gay women part ways over the advocacy of prostitution and over pornography which many gay men see as an extension of freedom of expression. In the lesbian community, the emphasis is on the emotional commitment and equality between women. Our struggle for liberation involves both becoming visible and clarifying the distinct issues which affect our lives.

Lesbianism is probably one of the single most important factors in our lives. It affects how we relate to our families, what jobs are open to us, where we live and who we choose as friends. But especially, lesbianism is a positive force for us. We are enriched by a community that has enabled us to challenge the "norms" of society and by relationships that are based on depth and a commitment to equality and growth.

Lesbians and feminists feel it is vital that they take responsibility for breaking the silence which continually surrounds the love between women. By speaking out, we hope to awaken women to the possibilities

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