

LISTEN ANARCHIST !

Sexism in the Movement

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At the anarchist conference, the Wellington @fem group held a workshop on sexism in the movement. Two hours were set aside to discuss the subject, but the womyn involved felt that issues were only addressed superficially.

Towards the end of the conference, a womyn's-only discussion was held, in which womyn sat down and came up with a list of critiques of the sexism workshop. We feel that the issues raised during this discussion reflect some of the wider sexism present in the movement. Here is a condensed version of the list:

- Womyn didn't feel safe to talk about their experiences – especially around sexual abuse and sexuality.
- Womyn felt like they had to moderate what they said so that men didn't feel attacked. Some people resorted to talking about issues very hypothetically instead of personalising their experiences.
- The emphasis was taken off womyn. There was a failure to recognise that sexism affects us more.
- Men did not respect that womyn are the experts in their own oppression and talk about the issues on our terms.
- Men only acknowledged superficial aspects of sexism, eg. womyn being relegated to kitchen jobs.
- Womyn didn't feel that they were being listened to.
- Men attempted to rationalise womyn's experiences, instead of acknowledging that there aren't always logical reasons for the way people feel.
- Womyn felt that their feelings and experiences were being trivialised.
- There was a failure to discuss sexism in the anarchist movement and not just in wider society.
- Men weren't familiar with feminist ideas.
- Many men didn't seem interested, eg. At the childcare discussion.
- Womyn want men to come to us about solving oppression HOWEVER men need to understand that there are not always simple solutions and simply acknowledging that there is a problem is an integral part of the process.

Any discussion of sexism should start with men acknowledging that womyn are the experts on our own oppression. It's important that men take responsibility for addressing sexism but this has to be done with

a reverence for womyn's experiences. Men should never assume that they know better than womyn how sexism should be fought. If men are serious about ending male privilege they need to begin asking womyn how we want to be supported in our struggle and listening.

We have separated this article into several sections dealing with some of the different facets of sexism and oppression womyn face in the movement.

Meetings

Meetings take up a huge chunk of most activists' lives, so it's important we make them sexism-free.

One important issue is that our meetings are often dominated by male speakers. Womyn don't speak up because it doesn't feel safe to do so. Often we are scared of being personally attacked for voicing an opinion, or feel unconfident and uneducated around other more involved men. Meetings with a competitive atmosphere are worse. To be heard, you have to be aggressive and determined, and many womyn feel that the conflict is not worth it. We have been raised by a society that values womyn who are friendly, accommodating, pretty and outgoing – but not assertive.

Meetings need to have a welcoming atmosphere, with people listening to each other and being free to speak their mind, instead of the majority of men talking while the womyn listen nicely. I have heard men treat the fact that men usually “speak first, last, and longest,” as a joke, or as a coincidence. It isn't. At two meetings recently, an activist kept time of how long men and womyn spoke. Her results confirmed the gender imbalance we are speaking of.

The activist found that during a meeting held to talk about creating a policy for the group which had equal numbers of men and womyn attending, five womyn spoke, and ten men. The men also spoke longer and more frequently than the womyn. She compared this to another meeting held by the same group a few weeks later, where they discussed whether using certain photographs were exploitative. All the womyn spoke, as well as the men who had not voiced their opinion before.

At the first meeting, the focus had been more on right versus wrong decision making. At the second meeting, the focus was more on how people felt. The activist who reported this also mentioned that the men who didn't speak at the discussion did not have a university education, while those that did speak generally did.

This illustrates how womyn aren't the only group marginalised at meetings; ethnic minorities and people with less formal education are also likely to feel uncomfortable or unsafe participating when the structures are run for and by dominate and privileged groups.

Childcare

Childcare is another important issue that is often overlooked. It is seen as the parents' responsibility to look after their child/ren, so many mothers (as well as fathers and other guardians) are excluded from meetings and events. Mothers of young children in particular find it difficult juggling other commitments while needing to care for their child/ren.

It is difficult for us (the authors) to write too much on childcare since we don't have children ourselves. We do, however, recognise that not many events are child-friendly, or make specific arrangements for

children. Meetings usually take place late at night, and babysitting is expensive. Who will put the kids to bed, and look after the younger ones? One Wellington group dealt with this by always holding meetings at the house at one parent – but it is also important not to assume that that will always be the solution. We need to work with and listen to parents to ensure we are doing all we can.

Another issue is that childcare isn't seen as important in activist groups. Can you imagine meetings where people who volunteer to stay at home with the children during demos are valued just as much as those who speak to the media? Can you imagine men being the ones to stay at home for a change? If we are serious about making anarchism a reality, then perhaps we should, because raising children is the responsibility of the whole community.

Sexual Oppression

Sexual abuse and sexual harassment are huge and extremely urgent issues that the anarchist community have failed to deal with appropriately. You would have thought that this shouldn't even be an issue in a community dedicated to liberation and equality, but unfortunately it is, and we should all be furious about it. One of the main problems is that there is a lack of understanding of just what constitutes abuse and harassment and how it should be dealt with. Another problem is nobody is talking about these issues, or working out ways to resolve and prevent them in the first place.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is essentially any form of sexual attention that is unwelcome and offensive. This includes unwanted touching (such as kissing, hugging, pinching, etc) and sexual innuendo. It is often dismissed as a harmless joke, or as part of somebody's personality, but it is actually very serious. Sexual harassment can be the result of deliberate actions to maintain power-over, or alternatively of well-meaning but unexamined actions by some men. It can make womyn feel stressed, humiliated, angry, upset, helpless, frightened, or simply so fed up that they want to drop out of the movement and/or avoid certain activists.

Sexual harassment is unacceptable, and should not be trivialised or dismissed. Keep in mind that just because you don't find somebody's behaviour offensive, it doesn't mean that others will also be comfortable with it too. Spaces need to be created within our movement for womyn to speak up if they are being sexually harassed. People need to know that they will be taken seriously when voicing concerns about sexual harassment. If complaints are made, they need to be dealt with straight away – and the person who is making the complaint should not be dismissed as over sensitive or repressed. People have different boundaries, respect that! Just because you enjoy forming 20 person snuggle pits doesn't mean that everyone else feels safe snuggling complete strangers. Likewise, there are some people who will feel extremely uncomfortable when you start talking about your penis.

When was the last time you sat down and talked about sexual harassment? Which of your friends have been sexually harassed? How would the groups you are part of respond to a womyn who complained about being sexually harassed by your actions?

Rape and Sexual Abuse

We are incredibly angry that womyn have to be dealing with rape and sexual abuse in our movement. These issues, more than any other, have not been talked about and they are not going to go away. Two

situations have surfaced in anarchist circles last year, and while this article is not going to discuss the individual incidents, they brought up a number of points that seem to be obvious, but apparently aren't.

The most important thing is to support (and believe!) the survivors of rape and sexual abuse. There seems to be the impression that false accusations are common. They aren't. In fact, 95% of men who have been convicted of rape in a court of law, where all evidence undeniably points to rape, still deny responsibility for their actions. In cases of acquaintance rape, the situation gets even messier. We would like to point out that by assuming the rapist is innocent until proven guilty is essentially assuming that the survivor is guilty (of lying) until proven innocent, and this is at the very stage where the survivor will be needing the most support. Disbelief from other activists can/will cause secondary wounding, which is often as bad as, if not worse than, the original trauma. If we want a movement that is safe for womyn, supporting the survivors of rape is the least we can do.

We can't fit a discussion on the processes that need to be implemented to fight the rape and sexual abuse into this article; we simply do not have the space. Hopefully new writing will address this in future. Until then, please TALK about these issues, support survivors and educate yourself.

Challenges for the Future

- Listen to womyn
- Become more aware of the gender balance (of lack thereof)
- Pay attention to who talks in meetings
- Ask parents what support they would like from you
- Talk about sexual abuse and support survivors
- Read up on feminism (some suggested resources are below)
- Pay attention to your own behaviour. How are you contributing to sexism?

Resources and Suggested Reading

It is important to become familiar with feminism and anarcho-feminist ideas. We suggest you start by checking out [www. anarcha.org](http://www.anarcha.org).

For those without internet access, we suggest you read 'Untying the knot,' 'Anarchism and Feminism,' 'Quiet Rumours,' and other @fem booklets. There are also a lot of feminist journals and books in public libraries – it's a good idea to get acquainted with feminist theory.