

LESBIAN POVERTY

As women we suffer from all the same aspects of Poverty, in Health, Welfare, Law, Power and Control. As Lesbians we experience an extra dimension which we will try to tell you about.

LOW INCOME/PAY: We are a percentage of the huge number of women involved in low-income, part-time work or unemployed. Due to this situation we experience the loss of dignity and insecurity that is associated with Poverty. Some of us have well-paid, full-time, professional jobs. However, one thing we have in common is the fear that exposure can mean Automatic Poverty. Many of us choose/ or are forced to emigrate because in other countries there is less chance of our sexuality leading to impoverishment.

What we need

- is strong legislations in Ireland that protects us from harassment and loss of work because of our sexuality. Sexuality had no role in the workplace.

WOMEN'S ROLE/STATUS/UNPAID CARERS: This is a society which encourages and celebrates and rewards 'Marriage' of men and women. The system makes mortgages for houses within easy access for most married people. A lesbian couple would find it near impossible to get a mortgage. The heterosexual couple are rewarded for their union by a celebration often paid for by family; presents of all the items needed to start on that new journey. A lesbian couple live as 'Flat-mates' with a silence surrounding their situation. This often means they are isolated from family and neighbours, so there is no support network to help them to set up as a household. The very idea of 'Pretend-Families' is derided and knocked by both church and state.

To choose to live as a single woman is not easy or encouraged in this society. As a single lesbian woman who has made this choice, you are more open to pressure by society. The illusion³⁰⁰ is that we are in a state of 'waiting' for Mr. Right.

Our situation is seen as temporary, a limbo of wanting and waiting. This attitude lacks respect for choice. Taking this a step further we know that single women are prime targets for the role of Unpaid Carer - How many of the unpaid carers in Ireland are lesbians?

What we need

- is for our relationships and families to be recognised and respected.
- Access to such things as mortgages etc., to be made easier.
- The choice to live as a single woman to be respected and catered for in our own society.

HEALTH: Our main concern as lesbians is in the area of Gynaecological Health Care. It excludes the notion of Lesbian Sexuality. When we go for smear tests etc., we are treated as heterosexual women so our care is impoverished.

We have trouble gaining access to see our lovers when they are seriously ill in hospital and are often the last to know what is really happening. Our role as next of kin is denied us by hospital and other family members.

What we need

- is a Health Care system which includes us fully and openly in all aspects.

SELF-IMAGE/VIOLENCE: To come out as a Lesbian is a very big decision. Some of us are out in some areas of our lives, many others are hidden away behind the oppression of religion, tradition, sexuality and economics. It takes a lot of courage to come out against the back-drop of fear, guilt and isolation. We lay ourselves open to rejection by family and friends. We are the bait for abuse, violence, and derision on the street, in the home etc. Our life style can become an area for labelling and imposition by media, state and church. Very often in choosing to tell our friends we take on a responsibility for their reactions especially if they are finding it difficult

to cope. This can lend itself to a lot of stress and depression and guilt in our own lives. The bottom line is that taking any steps to being open in our life style can lead to emotional and financial poverty. We say that this will all continue so long as language and society ignore us.

What we need

- is to be included so we can be open.

OTHER AREAS: Pain, grief and poverty is experienced in many other areas. As lesbian mothers we are wide open to bad treatment by Social Welfare and The Law. We are seen as unfit and this fear often keeps us in marriages and situations which are detrimental to our mental and physical health. We fear rejection by our children or worse still loss of our children.

The church offers us very little solace. For many where religion is an important and integral part of our lives; it can also lead to guilt and lack of respect for ourselves by the biased role it takes.

Many of us are addicted to alcohol, dependent on prescribed drugs etc., suffering from mental/physical illness (for which we are unlikely to get proper care)

If we are lucky we can live a double life; if not, we are forced to totally suppress ourselves and our true expression. At this TRIBUNAL ON WOMEN'S POVERTY we call for

- Our existence to be recognised in a holistic and open way so that we not longer live in fear of the Poverty Trap.
- A willingness by people to listen, learn and change the social climate around us.
- Changes that will allow any of our sisters, daughters, mothers to live the lives they choose without fear of poverty/loss of dignity.
- Education that will change the fear, hostility and threat that surrounds our visibility.

THANK YOU.