

Of Brides and Bridges

Linking Feminist, Queer, and Animal Liberation Movements

by pattrice jones

The raiders captured more than a hundred females. Chased and forced to give up all but 30 of their captives, they chose carefully, keeping the purpose of breeding in mind and retained those with the lightest skin and strongest muscles.

The raiders were agents of the Lord's Resistance Army of Uganda. The captives, not cows but school girls, were distributed as "wives" to senior officers, who took care to rape them whenever they were fertile. Any girl who refused sex to her assigned "husband" was branded twice and whipped 200 times.

This particular raid happened in 1996 but similar forays continue to this day. Both boys and girls are impressed into service as child soldiers. Girls judged fit for reproduction become sex slaves to adult soldiers, forced to bear and raise children and to do heavy labor whenever not servicing their designated husbands.

The taking of both women and animals as spoils of war is a tradition that dates back to the earliest days of pastoralism and continues to this day. The same tactics have been and continue to be used to "domesticate" (i.e., break the will and control the reproduction of) both women and animals. It's not an accident that "bride" and "bridle" sound the same, that "grooms" take the reins of both horses and wives, or that we speak of animal "husbandry."

Animal liberationists know a lot about the exploitation of nonhuman animals but often are woefully uninformed about the injuries and injustices suffered by human females. Similarly, while any animal liberationist can list a litany of abuses perpetrated by humans upon nonhumans, many shy away from explicitly listing the crimes committed by human males.

Like the exploitation of dairy cows to satisfy human desire for milk and of hens to satisfy human desire for eggs, the exploitation of women and children to satisfy male desire for sexual pleasure is big business. According to the United Nations, one million children are enslaved by the sex tourism industry in Asia alone. Some villages specialize in procurement of children for pedophile tourists. Destinations in South America and the Caribbean also are known to be havens for men who want to rape or buy local girls and boys.

Meanwhile, teenaged and adult women are held in bondage in brothels all over the world. Rather than declining, the trafficking of girls and women for the sex industry has been increasing in recent years. A quick search of recent news stories turns up reports of Lithuanian women sold into sex slavery in Britain; thousands of women from South Asia, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe trafficked into sex slavery in Australia every year; smuggling of sex slaves into the U.S. via Canada; and the closure of a brothel

in Vermont in which the purported prostitutes were, in fact, debt servitors from Korea.

In most instances, these kinds of slavery are technically illegal but persist because they bring pleasure to the powerful. Like cock fighting and trafficking in endangered species, the trade in sex slaves continues to thrive despite alleged efforts of male-dominated governments to end it. Similarly, legal discrimination against women continues because men have chosen to retain rather than divest themselves of the illegitimate authority they hold over women. The male-controlled governments of 41 countries have refused to sign the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; six countries (including the U.S.) have signed but not ratified the treaty; another 43 have ratified the treaty but stipulated that they will not abide by certain elements of it.

In many places, women lack the legal standing of adult males and are therefore virtually the property of their fathers, brothers or husbands. In addition to being denied an education or the right to vote, adult women in many countries are legally minors who may not travel, go to a doctor, take a job, or make other life decisions without the consent of whichever male relative is in charge of them.

Forced marriages are still legal and common in many countries. Sexual and physical assaults within marriages are common within all countries. One in five women in the U.S. is assaulted by an intimate partner and, in several states, a man may not be prosecuted for raping his wife, since he has the legal right to enter her body whenever he likes. Two-thirds of married women in Chile, Mexico, and Korea have been battered by their husbands. More than half of all murders of females in Bangladesh, Brazil, Kenya, and Thailand are committed by current or former intimate partners.

Abuse of females begins in childhood. One out of three women in the U.S., Barbados, and New Zealand was sexually abused as a child or adolescent. The everyday nature of sexual abuse of girl children by adult males gives a clue as to the political purpose of what seem like purely private traumas. How do you "break" an animal? Rob her of the feeling that she controls her own body. How do you ensure that you can control an animal's reproduction? Assert your right to do whatever you want to her genitals as early as possible.

The most extreme form of the ongoing domestication and reproductive control of human females is female genital mutilation, in which various strategies (cutting off the clitoris, sewing shut the vagina, etc.) are utilized to ensure that females cannot enjoy sex and therefore will be unlikely to stray from their assigned sexual partners. The UN Development Program estimates that about 100 million girls suffer genital mutilation every year. In Sierra Leone this

year, the Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Women's Affairs threatened to "sew up the mouths" of anyone speaking against the mutilation of the bodies of adolescent girls.

At the same time, all over the world, cows, sows, and hens are exploited specifically for the fruits of their reproductive organs. It's time for feminists and animal liberationists to come together to struggle for freedom and self-determination for all female animals.

Common Cause

How can animal liberationists make common cause with feminists? All the usual rules about building and maintaining coalitions apply:

1. Do your homework

Before approaching potential allies, make sure you know who they are. Make it your business to learn about the history and current status of their social movement, how they analyze and respond to the problems they seek to solve, and what words they use to talk about the world as they see it.

2. Make friends

Coalitions are relationships. Building and maintaining a coalition is as easy—and as difficult—as building and maintaining a friendship. All of the same skills are needed: communication (which means listening as well as talking), empathy, reliability, genuineness, and a willingness to share both burdens and blessings.

3. Start small

The easiest way to initiate a coalition is to show up to support the efforts of your potential partner on some issue about which you agree (whether or not this issue is directly relevant to animals or veganism). That way, you're not a stranger when you initiate a coalition. So, for example, members of a local vegetarian society might make contact with a local anti-racist organization by showing up for a rally against police brutality or helping to stuff envelopes or put up posters for Black History Month activities. One great way for animal advocacy organizations to make friends quickly and easily is to supply vegan food for community activities. Food Not Bombs chapters in several cities routinely provide food at progressive events. Farm Animal Reform Movement (FARM) staff members have brought stacks of sandwiches to peace rallies in Washington, DC; hungry marchers are always happy to take a brochure along with a free sandwich.

4. Work together

The next step is proposing shared work on some issue about which you and your potential coalition partner already agree. While you are working together on something that is not a source of conflict, trust grows and cross-fertilization of ideas naturally occurs. Then (and only then) you can begin to talk about the things about which you disagree. In so doing, you must be as open to what they want you to learn as you hope they will be about what you want them to learn. Returning to the example of the local vegetarian society and the anti-racist organization, after a time of getting to know one another, members of the vegetar-

ian group might propose a joint project to get soy milk into the school lunch program, since the majority of children of color are lactose intolerant and may have their afternoon learning inhibited by discomfort associated with milk consumption. Such a project would be worthwhile in itself. Furthermore, as they progress, the activists from the two groups would get to know and trust one another. Then, the members of the anti-racist group will be more open to information about the animal abuse and health hazards associated with meat—but only if the vegetarian group is willing to be just as open to what their coalition partners want them to hear about race.

5. Be the bridge

Everybody talks about building bridges between movements but I think we have to go further than that. Those of us who want to span the gap between the animal liberation movement and other peace, justice, and liberation movements must be willing to be the bridges we envision. Bridges must extend themselves and be able to bear weight. We, too, must be willing to stretch and to tolerate some discomfort.

Forging Feminist Friendships

Let's apply those rules to the project of forging working relationships between feminists and animal liberationists. We can do some homework by applying the insights of feminism to the project of animal liberation. Feminists understand and distinguish between sex (male, female) and gender (masculine, feminine) and understand gender to be what sociologists call a social construct. Social constructs are cultural ideas that seem natural because almost everybody agrees with them. Our social constructs about gender are so powerful that parents of virtually identical one-day old infants perceive the males as bigger, stronger, and more hardy than their female peers. Those perceptions can influence the ways the infants are treated, thereby becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. An infant who is perceived as a big strong boy is likely to get more stimulation, exercise, and freedom than an infant who is perceived as a small weak girl.

If we look more closely at the social construction of gender, we can see that animals figure prominently. We project our ideas about gender onto animals and then allow our gendered perceptions of them to convince us that our ideas about gender are reflections of the natural world. Often, we treat the animals within our control in ways that will make it more likely that their behavior will conform to our gender stereotypes. Caged hens and crated sows have little option but to become embodiments of passive "femininity." Meanwhile, tethered fighting roosters and tortured rodeo bulls are goaded by frustration into acting out our ideas about aggressive "masculinity."

We can talk about such ideas with feminists, making friends along the way. We can offer to bring vegan food to feminist events in our communities in order to continue the conversations. We then can move on to proposing joint projects. Milk is my number one choice for working to

gether with feminists, because it's a product that begins with the exploitation of the mammary glands of the dairy cow and ends up increasing the incidence of breast cancer in women. Battery cages and gestation crates are two other examples of gendered exploitation of animals in agriculture. Bull riding and cock fighting are examples of gendered exploitation of animals for entertainment.

Some organizations have made some headway on other issues of joint concern. Aware of the connection between domestic violence and animal abuse, Feminists for Animal Rights has worked on the problem of women who stay in dangerous households because domestic violence shelters don't accept animals and they are afraid of what their batterer will do to their animal companions if they leave. The Women's Health and Ethics Coalition has worked on the problem of Premarin, which is a dangerous drug made from the urine of pregnant mares and prescribed to women as if menopause were a disease rather than a natural phase in the female life cycle.

The FAR and WHEC campaigns are good examples of feminists within the animal liberation community taking the initiative to start campaigns and then invite feminists from outside the movement to join them. I'd like to see a coalition of feminist individuals and organizations within the movement agree to focus on one of the gendered aspects of animal exploitation for a year, coming at the problem from many different directions and actively promoting feminist analysis of and activism against animal exploitation along the way.

I've been talking to feminists about animal liberation for long enough to share a few tips. Talking about the social construction of gender by means of animals really does seem to spark good conversations.

If that sounds too abstract for you, then you'll be glad to know that I've also had some success talking about milk in very blunt terms. I share my own empathy with the cows and my own consequent revulsion with milk, expressing my own feelings and trusting that my feminist friends will draw their own conclusions about the right thing to do in the context of such senseless suffering.

Now I'm going to share my most valuable tool. It's a sentence. Here it is: "Eating meat is something you do to someone else's body without their consent." Milk or eggs can be substituted for meat but, no matter what, this sentence must be said in a calm, level, matter-of-fact tone so that it can slide past the defensiveness long enough to sink in. Feminists are very committed to bodily self-determination and, unless this sentence is said, can perceive demands for diet change as efforts to control what they do with their own bodies. It's imperative that they hear and understand that consuming animal products is doing something to someone else's body without the consent of that individual. Any good feminist will recoil at the idea. She may not change her diet immediately but, if this sentence sinks in, she will never be as comfortable consuming animal products again.

While we're on the subject of asking people to change, we should remember that feminists aren't the only ones who will have to change for this alliance to work. Women in the movement are going to have to start thinking of themselves as the animals that we all are and embrace their own animal rights. Men in the movement are going to have to realize that it's just as wrong to mock, insult, denigrate, or assault women as it is to mock, insult, denigrate, or assault other animals.

The good news is that feminists are already used to thinking about connections. For the past several years, feminist scholars and activists have challenged themselves to think about and act upon the links between sexism and racism, sexism and class exploitation, sexism and environmental degradation, etc. I think feminists are ready to start thinking about the link between speciesism and sexism if animal liberationists are ready to talk about it and prepared to structure our organizations and our actions in a feminist manner.

Queering Animal Liberation

Many feminists see homophobia as what Suzanne Pharr called a "weapon of sexism." Gender relations are policed by means of discrimination and violence against gay men, lesbians, and others considered queer. Girls who don't pay enough deferential attention to boys risk being labeled lesbian while boys who refuse to assume their assigned dominant role may find themselves on the wrong side of a gay bashing.

Seeing the springtime behavior of the ducks at the sanctuary, we didn't need to read Bruce Bagemihl's book *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* to know that nonhuman animals are not exclusively heterosexual. As that very comprehensive book demonstrates, sexuality among nonhuman animals encompasses every permutation we've ever attempted and many that are well beyond our rather limited physical capabilities.

Nonhuman animals do lots of different things with themselves and each other for sheer sensual pleasure. Characterizations of homosexuality as "unnatural" hurts animals as well as gay and lesbian people. By denying that animals have sex for pleasure or form pair bonds that aren't about reproduction, it's easier to claim that animals are automata who don't have feelings and are not sentient individuals.

That being the case, animal liberation and gay liberation are necessarily bound up with one another. Again, an alliance is long overdue. The usual rules apply, and success is more likely if certain things are kept in mind.

The most important thing to remember is that queer activists have been both central and marginalized in almost every social movement—including the animal liberation movement. There are gay and lesbian movement leaders who do not come out because they know they would lose credibility in some circles by doing so. Some of the best work in this movement has been and is being done by peo-

ple who you may never know are not heterosexual.

While those people may be comfortable with their choices, the fact remains that most queer activists these days are no longer willing to put up with being pushed to the side or asked to subdivide themselves. This is particularly true of lesbian feminists, many of whom remember the bad old days when some straight feminists did everything they could to distance themselves from the lesbians who were staffing the rape crises centers, starting the domestic violence shelters, and otherwise doing the hard work of protecting straight women from straight men. These lesbian feminists, who had selflessly devoted themselves to helping other women to cope with and heal from the dam-

age done to them by the men in their lives, were called selfish whenever they insisted that lesbian issues be included in the feminist agenda. Lesbians and gay men of color have faced similar charges within the anti-racist organizations they have helped to build.

Most people don't like being called selfish. Because of this history of marginalization, which is ongoing, queer activists may be particularly likely to recoil if asked to give up their own rights in the service of a supposedly larger goal. Those of us who know for sure that all forms of oppression are related are particularly unlikely to tolerate nonsensical demands that we accept being oppressed in order to end oppression.

DOs & DON'Ts

- Do make yourself useful so that you will eventually be regarded as a trusted ally.
- Don't try to introduce your agenda to an organization until you have won that trust.
- Do refer to your own veganism as an expression of your commitment to peace and freedom for everyone.
- Don't expect people to immediately see the connection and change their diets overnight.
- Do refer to your veganism as a reflection of your own feminism, if that is true.
- Don't pretend to be a feminist if you're not.
- Do become a feminist if you're not.
- Don't be simplistic when making analogies.
- Do talk about reproductive freedom for everyone.
- Don't use loaded words like "rape" unless you really know what you're doing.
- Do attend to the sex, race, class, ability and sexual orientation of speakers at events and other people in positions of power.
- Don't tokenize people by putting them forward inappropriately or asking them to represent their race, class, sex, orientation, or ability.
- Do remember how much work you needed to do to unlearn the things you were taught about animals.
- Don't forget that you will need to do at least as much work to unlearn the things you've been taught about sex, gender, race, and sexual orientation.
- Do understand that working in coalition means you will not agree on every point.
- Don't even try to do this if you are currently so angry at human hubris that you cannot work harmoniously with people who have not (yet) embraced animal liberation as a goal.
- Do remember that change is a process and that other animal advocates are with you in spirit even when you feel very alone.
- Do what you can and trust that others are doing the same.

This article originally appeared in Satya Magazine. Visit www.satyamag.com to read more articles or subscribe.