

Vaginas as an Economic Hindrance

By Marianne Mba

“ We do not have single issue struggles because we do not live single issue lives”
~Audre Lorde

Obergefell v. Hodges is the Supreme Court ruling passed in the summer of 2015 that ensured the fundamental right to marry to same-sex couples under the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. Although this was an amazing win for the LGBTQA+ community and for overall justice and equality in America, there are still many aspects of the lives of gay and trans people that are still regularly under siege as a result of discrimination against sexual orientation and preference. Marriage equality and gay rights are often viewed solely through a lens that presents them as only social issues. But one of the more unacknowledged areas in which members of the LGBTQA+ community experience prejudice is economic in origin. The quietest bout of the fight for equality regarding LGBTQA+ people happens in the workplace.

In their work “The Different Dilemmas of Gay and Lesbian Professionals”, James Woods (1997) analyzes the difficulties faced by gay and lesbian employees within the white-collar workforce. Woods goes into great detail specifically regarding the topic of heterosexism and its impact on the workplace. In addition to this, Woods provides elucidation of the ways in which heterosexism puts lesbians at more of a stagnant disadvantage than their gay male counterparts. While both queer men and women live perpetually in the fear of how their sexuality will affect their standing in their work environments, the weight of this anxiety is unevenly distributed. Lesbian women in the work environment must firstly withstand sexism as the workplace from its inception was and is still viewed as a proverbial “boy’s club,” particularly within certain fields such as law, medicine or STEM. Gay men as well do not face the same issues as their female counterparts in terms of wage and upward mobility.

Men are instantly viewed as being more respectable, more analytical, and more capable than women. The dichotomy between the hardships of gay men and lesbian women in the workplace further exemplify the fact that privilege and oppression can be experienced simultaneously (Hankivsky, 2014). Gay, cisgendered men are definitely part of society’s disenfranchised population because they are homosexual but are still able to incur a substantial amount of privilege because they have penises. To that end, Woods (1997) addresses what they call “The Myth of the Asexual Professional” (p. 2). Woods observed that when they interviewed heterosexual and queer men about how they viewed the intermingling of sexual identity and the workplace, many of them believed that there was no overlap

between the two. A gay naval commander argued that “your work life and your sex life should be kept apart. Nobody is gay or straight when they’re on the ship, they’re just at work.” (Woods, 1997, p. 3) Queer women on the other hand disagreed with this perspective. Gail Murphy, a lesbian assistant vice president at a large bank in Philadelphia, stated that “You take your whole self to work, no matter where you go. I figure that my sexual orientation is so woven into who Gail Murphy is that I could never show up fully at work without it. My sexuality is very integrated in me, just as it is in people who are heterosexual or bisexual. I mean, is heterosexual stuff private? Of course not.” (Woods, 1997, p.3) Although many would like to believe that sex and the workplace are completely separated, that notion is simply a fallacy. Workers bring their perceptions of what is gender appropriate behavior to work with them and these perceptions have a great influence on how they interact with those they work with.

Prejudice is not something that one can take off, fold neatly and retrieve once they have punched out the clock. Men, specifically cisgendered heterosexual men, have the luxury of being able to remain oblivious to the extent with which sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation influence the workplace experience because they reside within an environment that is tailored to empower people who fall into the categories in which they already exist. It is extremely easy to say that the workplace is “asexual” or that “sex doesn’t matter” when your identity is not being condemned. Lesbians in the workforce are also forced to conform in terms of aesthetic. They are expected to be “lipstick lesbians” as a way of conforming to patriarchal norms and preventing themselves from being outed. However, the sad reality is when they do comply with these standards they are seen as no more than sex objects and consequently their careers are still hindered.

Currently in the U.S., only nineteen states and the District of Columbia have in-state legislation that protects LGBTQA+ staff members from being discriminated against by employers. Three other states protect employees on the basis of sexual orientation, but do not provide any protections in relation to gender identity. Furthermore, equal pay for equal work is not implemented across this country. Thus the tribulations experienced by lesbian professionals must be viewed in a manner that encompasses the entire scope of their worries. Until there is an incentive to tackle the circumstances that arise as a result of their sexual orientation AND their gender identity, there can be no justice for queer women in the workplace or anywhere else.