Political Lesbianism and Female Friendship

What are the reasons for choosing political lesbianism?

Is political lesbianism used as a political strategy for women to create/gain female friendships and sisterhood?

Author: Natalija Laptosevic

Faculty of Social Science and International Relations

Social Policy and Equal Opportunities specialization

Professor of thesis writing seminar: Dr Andrew Ryder
Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between political lesbianism and the need that women have for female friendships. The thesis investigates the process of making the choice to exit heterosexuality, as well as the reasons behind this choice. A short history of the idea of political lesbianism is presented in this thesis, alongside with the critiques of compulsory heterosexuality and further explorations of female friendships. The main sociological issues are revolving around sexuality and accessing this subject from social constructionist approach. Reflexivity is used as one of the tools during the thesis analysis. Findings suggest that women are, through radical feminism, choosing their sexuality and rejecting heterosexuality, providing rich analysis behind their reasons and motivation to go through this process.
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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1

2. Literature review ..................................................................................................................................... 4

   2.1 Political Lesbianism ............................................................................................................................. 10

   2.2 Female Friendships .............................................................................................................................. 13

3. Methodology ........................................................................................................................................... 15

   3.1 Methodological and Theoretical Perspective ....................................................................................... 15

   3.2 Research Methods ............................................................................................................................... 16

   3.3 Ethics .................................................................................................................................................. 16

   3.4 SWOT Analysis .................................................................................................................................... 17

4. Data Analysis .......................................................................................................................................... 17

   4.1 Background History ............................................................................................................................. 19

   4.2 Background History; Sexual orientation .............................................................................................. 20

   4.3 Reasons Behind the Choice ................................................................................................................ 22

   4.4 How Did This Process Look Like ....................................................................................................... 26

   4.5 Meeting Other Political Lesbians ...................................................................................................... 29

   4.6 My Answers to the Question ............................................................................................................. 29

5. Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 32

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................................. 34

Appendix ...................................................................................................................................................... 36
1. Introduction

In the 1970s radical feminists constructed a new political theory and movement from lesbian feminism – political lesbianism. Being a lesbian was still considered, in most parts of the world at that time, as a mental illness or sexual deviation from heterosexuality, and with introducing political lesbianism these ideas have been challenged. Political lesbianism is the theory (and practice) that perceives sexual orientation as a choice, opposing the idea that it is innate and opposing biological determinism, thus it is aligned to social constructionism. Exiting heterosexuality (compulsory heterosexuality as Adriene Rich explains), leaving men, is seen as an option that would lead to the destruction of male dominated system/male supremacy. As Sheila Jeffreys, radical feminist theorist and one of the creators of this term has stated: “Any women could be a lesbian. It was a revolutionary political choice which, if adopted by millions of women, would lead to the destabilization of male supremacy as men lost the foundation of their power in women’s selfless and unpaid, domestic, sexual, reproductive, economic and emotional servicing. It was to be the base from which we could reach out to dismantle men’s power.” (Jeffreys 1993, p9)

Feminists have defined sexuality/heterosexuality as political strategy performed by men to oppress women. Women’s everyday experiences in patriarchal societies are political, just existing in a society as a woman is political. This derives from the influence of the famous slogan: “Personal is political”. This slogan shone a light on institutions in society, such as sex, family, abortion and so on as not solely private issues, but with political weight to it. Through political lesbianism feminists have stated the need of women to be with other women, since compulsory heterosexuality is one of the political acts that alienate women. This need includes social/political aspects such as sisterhood, women only community, supporting each other in a fight against male tyranny, sharing the knowledge and intimacy. All these ideas are part of making the choice of being a political lesbian. Genital sex is not the central part, some women who made a choice to become political lesbians did not feel sexually attracted to other women and decided to be asexual or celibacy. As an idea that emerged in the 1970s, it is associated with lesbian separatism (separation from men, institutions and roles that are male dominated and benefit men), but it is not exclusive to it.
In this thesis I am investigating the motivation of women who made this choice in the recent years. I am interested in whether the importance of being with women and centering their activism/life/political views on women was the main factor in their decision.

As part of a process of reflexivity I consider my location in the research. “Reflexivity is the process of becoming self-aware. Researchers make regular efforts to consider their own thoughts and actions in light of different contexts. Reflexivity, then, is a researcher's ongoing critique and critical reflection of his or her own biases and assumptions and how these have influenced all stages of the research process. The researcher continually critiques impressions and hunches, locates meanings, and relates these to specific contexts and experiences”. (Begoray, Banister, 2010) I find this important for a feminist research project, to reflect on the entire research context, especially upon data collection and data analysis. These women wrote against the prevailing ethnographic conventions by drawing more directly on personal experience to show the process of understanding, recording their own puzzlements, sometimes despair, and relating moments of discovery and revelation. By presenting narrative dramas of daily life in foreign settings, they illuminated the general through focus on the particular. (Okely, Callaway, 1992, p31)

My main interest in this topic emerged when I decided to make this choice and become a political lesbian in 2015 (it was a two years long process). The first time I encountered the idea of choice regarding sexuality, I was repulsed by the idea and I was ambivalent towards the theory behind it. Political lesbianism is a very specific part of lesbian feminism; in that sense it is understandable that something like this is not very common to hear in everyday life and does appear very strange. Even within radical feminist circles, there are women who are unfamiliar with political lesbianism and not accepting once they come face to face with it. My choice was not such a big step in my life, even if I do come from a small, conservative town in South-West of Serbia. Throughout my life, I was lucky enough that my parents have moved to the capital, where I become an activist and many other possibilities opened in my life (including the idea of leaving men). However, it was a challenging process, full of self doubt, and a long process. But not a surprising one, since my activism is women centered and I was welcomed with support from my family and
friends during this transition which I term a “process of sexual awareness, exiting heterosexuality or rejecting heterosexuality”.

Another reason that sparked the interest in this topic are the articles from different magazines; containing research about older women (in their 40s-50s) leaving their husbands and becoming lesbians. This phenomenon even got academic attention and the term Late-Blooming Lesbians’ is used to describe women who are making this choice. (Guardian, 2010) It is possible to find mostly researches from psychologists, who are questioning whether sexuality is fluid and if it’s innate or not. (Diamond, 2008) Even if this research is interesting and providing new knowledge, they are not including a feminist approach and or critical approach, thus leaving us with only biological explanations without much sociological explanations regarding the subject. Reading only the findings of the research I felt the lack of critique and lack of socio/economic/political background that would give richer explanation to it. One more interesting fact is that so far I have encountered articles about women. This made me connect the need for female friendship and need for female companions in a male dominated world, with the choice to become a lesbian.

The problem that will be analyzed is sexuality, the way lesbian feminists (especially political lesbians) are deconstructing it, through challenging the idea of sexuality being primarily biological phenomenon. One more thing that will be part of the analysis is the motivation of some women to still make this choice, despite the fact that the radical feminist movement is not so popular or wide spread at the moment and in the recent years, which leads to small number of support groups regarding radical feminist ideas and theories. A common misconception is that the thesis will tackle is in connection to innate sexuality and arguing against this statement, while providing alternative explanations to it and the importance of deconstructing such statements.

Methodological perspectives used are feminist approach (approach that focuses on the experiences of women in natural social settings, where the aim is to ’make women visible, raise their consciousness and empower them) (Gelling, 2013) and critical approach (It aims
to move beyond the obvious in order to uncover the effects of political structures and their associated power relations. Its ultimate intent is emancipator) (Griffiths, 2009). Feminism is approaching gender through its relation to power, acknowledging that there are gender hierarchies and the ones in power (men) are oppressing the others with less power (women). This affects women in everyday interactions, through more complex social levels, such as compulsory heterosexuality, race, economic status… Criticizing social norms, through gender relation, allows me to get deeper understanding of the subject.

2. Literature review

Human sexuality is the topic that has been challenging for many researchers, since it has been seen as a private issue. However, in the last couple of decades, the approach to sexuality has changed and provided many different theories and explanations regarding sexuality and sexual orientations. Following topic of the literature review will focus on exploring the social constructionists approach towards sexuality, more specific sexual orientation being the social construct. Different sciences have different definitions regarding sexuality. Psychology will ensure more attention to the emotional aspect, while some biologists will mostly focus on the possibility of one sex to give birth and the other sex to impregnate. There are still some biologists, who are interested in sexuality regarding sexual orientation, or trying to provide explanations concerning the nature versus nurture debate, as the same can be found in the sociological theories about innate sexuality or sexuality being learned behavior.

Starting the discussion I consider the introduction to sexuality through Sexuality and Gender chapter from Anthony Giddens Sociology (2006). In this chapter Giddens outlines the historical background and sociological explanations regarding human sexuality and sexual orientation. He emphasizes the importance of socialization, because this process through which people become self-aware in society and gain knowledge, teaches people the norms, the rules they are supposed to follow. He states that we can notice different patterns in different societies regarding sexuality. For example, in some homosexuality could be seen as illegal, while in other societies it could be praised/supported/encouraged. From this
he grasps one of the conclusions: “Accepted types of sexual behavior also vary between
different cultures, which are one way we know that most sexual responses are learned
rather than innate. The most extensive study was carried out fifty years ago by Clellan Ford
and Frank Beach (1951), who surveyed anthropological evidence from more than two
hundred societies. Striking variations were found in what is regarded as “natural” sexual
behavior and in norms of sexual attractiveness.” (Giddens, 2006, 439) Furthermore through
the chapter he states that sexual orientation is the result from a complex interplay between
biological factors and social learning. (Giddens, 2006, 451) He continues with the
statement that even technology, as the part of society shapes human sexuality, through birth
control or abortion rights. Thus providing different angles that are important in having
broader picture regarding how complex the issue is.

Another important note Gidden states is the impact of sexual liberation. Most Western
society’s attitudes towards sexuality in the nineteenth, twentieth century were still under
influence of the Church and religious norms. Even if these attitudes have been imposed for
the last two thousand years, they were not always respected, as some people did perform
infidelity for example, or masturbation which goes against religious teachings. (Giddens,
2006, 443) People might have been thought specific rules, but practice shows different
outcome. Improvement occurred during one of the first phases of sexual liberation that
happened in 1920s, which helped people free themselves from strict norms regarding
sexuality. Even if they gained some freedom, sexuality was not publicly discussed and
people were not that aware of how many of them were sharing the same experiences. In
1960s, public expressed more positive stances regarding sexuality. The hippie lifestyle and
sexual revolution in this age gave more freedom and provided public discussion on
sexuality. (Giddens, 2006, 440-448)

Radical feminists do not praise the sexual liberation era and provide critiques of it, naming
patriarchal sex (heterosexuality) as political institution which disempowers women. (Rich,
1980) Liberation era allowed and encouraged violent practices such as sadomasochism to
flourish, while being oppressive and harmful towards women. I will go more into the depth
of radical feminists’ ideas in the future chapters.
As this issue hasn’t been complicated enough, I wanted to provide the interesting example of the study on identical twins. Identical twins have identical genes; therefore all of them should be homosexual. The studies (from 1991 and 1993, related studies of Bailey and Pillard) examined children, both males and females, where at least one of the twins identifies as homosexual. Given if the sexuality is biological or innate, their sexual orientation should be the same and affected by it. But the results from the research have proven that the homosexuality results from a combination of biological and social factors. (Giddens, 2006, 452) There is emphasis on the biology, since there were differences between identical and fraternal twins. However, since half of the siblings were not homosexual, socialization plays role. (Giddens, 2006, 451-452)

Michelle Foucault states in his History of Sexuality that sexuality is the history of repression. During the seventeenth century the bourgeoisie was the leading class in society, making the decision on sexuality (or repressing it as Foucault explains). Prior to that, men had been open about their sexuality and sexual practices. Foucault’s main focus is on how these power relations are produced, “The central issue, then (at least in the first instance), is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said”. (Foucault, 1978, p11) I have struggled with expanding this part of the literature review with relevant sociologists who have done their work on sexuality, since Foucault’s central question is not one of my mine main interests regarding the topic I am examining. Silvia Federici argues that “Foucault ignores the way that bourgeois control of women’s sexuality involved explicit force and terrorism through the witch hunts, land dispossession, and other repressive tactics. Indeed Foucault ignores questions about male domination and female sexuality altogether in discussing the transition to capitalism, making no mention of the witch hunts. He seems completely uninterested in repressive aspects of the control of women’s sexuality such as rape, battery, and harmful beauty fashions as body techniques of control which discipline women”. (Ferguson, 2005, p115)
While Foucault has a social constructionist approach, my main focus is lesbianism and compulsory heterosexuality.

Adrienne Rich in her essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* also provides a history of sexuality in some way, or as Rich names it *heterosexuality* since throughout her essay she only uses the term heterosexuality, implying that it is political institution, imposed on women, without much choice to it. “Heterosexuality has been both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women. Yet everywhere women have resisted it, often at the cost of physical torture, imprisonment, psychosurgery, social ostracism, and extreme poverty”. (Rich, 1980, p30) Rich states the practices, throughout which men exercised their power and performed heterosexuality. These two are just some of them: “To deny women [their own] sexuality—[by means of clitoridectomy and infibulation; chastity belts; punishment, including death, for female adultery; punishment, including death, for lesbian sexuality; psychoanalytic denial of the clitoris; strictures against masturbation]”. Or to force it [male sexuality] upon them—[by means of rape (including marital rape) and wife beating; father-daughter, brother-sister incest; the socialization of women to feel that male sexual “drive” amounts to a right; idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, the media, advertising, etc.; child marriage; arranged marriage; prostitution; the harem; psychoanalytic doctrines of frigidity and vaginal orgasm].” (Rich, 1980, p18)

In the discussion below I will give attention to other feminist scholars who provided alternative explanations of sexuality, more specifically lesbian sexual orientation and their political motivation.

Male violence against women was one of the first campaigns emerging within feminist movement. Even if the suffragette movement is seen as the grounds of the feminist movement, at the end of the nineteenth century, women have perceived sexuality (therefore sexual exploitation such as prostitution) as the core problem of women’s oppression in society. Authors such as Silvia Federici also give emphasis on women’s sexuality and how it has been abused throughout centuries, subjugating women to sexual objects and posing rigid and double standards on women. (Federici, 2004) Early fights of feminist movement from the end of nineteenth century against prostitution and violence against young girls
also brought revolutionary ideas regarding sexes and relationships between men and women. Women were choosing to not be with men and explaining their relationships to them as limiting, they were protesting against the idea that they should engage in marriage and provide sex to men and seeing these kinds of relationships as oppressing. As Sheila Jeffreys indicates in her work The Spinster and her Enemies: “Numbers of spinsters, at least until after the First World War, made a positive choice not to marry. They made such a choice, either because they regarded marriage as a form of humiliating slavery and dependence upon men, or because they wanted to pursue a career and fulfill their potential in a way which would not have allowed to them by their husbands.” (Jeffreys, 1997, 86) It would be a challenge to understand all of the reasons behind this choice that women were making. But I find it interesting that it did happen and they were considering it and practicing it. After all, as the famous feminist phrase states, “personal is political”, which they applied to their lives and activism. In a world dominated by men I find it especially interesting how many different ways women find to be with each other. However, I will explore this topic in the later parts of literature review, where I will investigate more this awareness and need for sisterhood.

Coming back to the choice, even if it was extremely political and a conscious decision, it remains hard to understand the core causes of celibate/unmarried “movement”. There has been a positive reaction, leading to more and more women choosing to not be with men. Education could be one of the factors that had influence on this decision, and feminism helped with the critique of the double standards regarding men and women, giving the political dimension to the fights of spinsters. The militant approach to the topic of sexuality remained; even if there have been divisions regarding what tactics they should use. There were women expressing their joy towards heterosexual intercourse, and women expressing no joy from such intercourse, launching major critique of the form of male sexuality, and advocated non-cooperation with the sexual desires of men. (Jeffreys, 1993, 100) Many women from the second group loved women and had sexual relationship with them, however not exposing themselves publicly since this could invalidate their ideas. The term lesbian was not used, probably because it was not accepted and it was stigmatized. (Jeffreys, 1993, 100) The politics were not deeply theoretical at the end of nineteenth
century, beginning of twentieth century. But I chose to use this historical overview, since these women have been practicing political lesbianism in some forms and I would argue that being a spinster/choosing a celibacy where choices that gave strong grounds for future ideas to grow.

Women not engaging in relationships with men – was not the choice only practiced in Western countries. Women from Kwangtung region in China refused to marry and live with men. Economic reasons could explain the reasons behind these decisions. At the end of nineteenth century, beginning of twentieth century, women were in the labor market. They were active in the fields, in the silk industry, in the rivers… This provided them with more independence to make this choice and movement *marriage resisters* got organized, existing for almost a century. Men leaving the country and migrating to America could also help us to put the situation in context and it certainly was one of the factors that led the movement to grow. The culture of women warriors was also preserved within folklore and traditional stories, portraying women as strong and resisting, which probably gave strength to women to resist the institution of marriage. One of the explanations of this resistance was that women were also socialized alone, in women only spaces or how they were called – girls houses. They have spent significant amount of the time with other women while growing up, which led to forming sworn sisterhoods and staying together in girl’s houses. Marriage was a war zone for women in this area. Getting married meant that women had to leave her natal family and move in into new household. They were dependant on others, on natal family and later in life on marriage family, and had no autonomy. Chinese proverb says: “A women married is like a pony bought – to be ridden or whipped at the master’s pleasure.” Resisting marriage and living with men was a political act, granting them the freedom. Even if some women were forced to marry and bare children, once upon finishing these tasks, they would return to their sworn sisterhood. Staying with women, getting educated and taking care of other women, is of the ideas of political lesbianism. It would be hard to know how many women were lesbians who didn’t want to engage with men, but certainly they were passionate about gaining their freedom and autonomy and supporting other women in these processes. (Raymond, 1986, 117-135)
2.1 Political Lesbianism

In the further text, I will go deeper into the topic of political lesbianism. Political lesbianism is a political choice and political strategy; it perceives human sexuality as a social construct and heterosexuality as mandatory and expected behavior from women. Women who are making the choice to leave men, are not doing this as a reaction against men, but because they love women and care about women. Citing Charlotte Bunch: “Women-identified Lesbianism is, then, more than a sexual preference, it is a political choice. It is political because relationships between men and women are essentially political, they involve power and dominance.” (Douglass, 1990, 145) Different radical feminist authors focus on different aspects of political lesbianism. Sheila Jeffreys in Lesbian Heresy emphasizes that: “It was to be the base from which we could reach out to dismantle men’s power. It was to be an alternative universe in which we could construct a new sexuality, a new ethics, a new culture in opposition to malestream culture. It was to be a powerhouse from which new feminist and lesbian positive values would reach to transform the world for women and bring the sado-society to an end.” (Jeffreys, 1993, 9)

Rita Mae Brown was a feminist to contribute a lot to the lesbian feminist theory, putting accent to the women’s relations to one another and importance of investing the time in women. She wrote: “Lesbianism is the one issue that deals with women responding positively to other women as total human beings worthy of total commitment. It is the one area where no men can tread.” (Douglass, 1990, 149)

*Any woman can be a lesbian*, the phase that saluted the era of 1960s/70s. Alix’s Dobkin song from 1973 – *Any woman (every woman) can be a lesbian, and chants like every woman is a lesbian at heart including all your moms*, marked the period of growing radical feminist ideas. Women were inspired with the critiques of heterosexuality and supported the idea of women becoming lesbians. However, this step was not seen as the ultimate political strategy. Being a lesbian still meant being a woman in society. Even if there are authors like Monique Witting arguing that a woman can only be seen in relation to men, the definition of the word woman comes from men in relation to them; therefore lesbians were not women since they were breaking this connection. All the philosophies aside, they were
still women in society subjugated to violence against women, and they were perceived like that in society. Therefore, choosing to become a lesbian was only a part of challenging the male supremacy, not ending the male supremacy.

There are controversies regarding this choice. Not many lesbians support the idea of possibility to exit heterosexuality and become a lesbian. Something that is not surprising, since not many lesbians are feminists and they are not interested in the women’s liberation movement, even being women themselves. The main disagreements are coming from the “born this way argument”, imposed by gay men in their fight to be recognized as equal members of society. I would argue that their fight was successful solely for them being men, and men supporting other men more than they do women, plus propagating this idea that they simply can’t help it and it is something they carry from their birth. As written before, there is no science which provides clear answers to human sexuality, whether it is biological or sociologically conditioned (as Giddens in 2006 points out, most likely it is the combination of both). However, political lesbians have been stigmatized and perceived as not really gay. Being real gay means being born like that, even if within the activist circles I am part of, there are not many lesbians who are gold starts (the term used to describe lesbians who have never had experience with men – maybe kissing, but no sexual intercourse). This is not to say that some women were not simply born like that, but that women can be socialized (and are socialized) to be with men and through different cultural patterns learn how to have relationships with them. Even within radical feminist movement, many activists are opposing the idea of political lesbianism and rejecting it as a possibility, sometimes finding it as an insult to lesbianism itself.

Another argument that is quite often imposed against political lesbianism is that it can be used by homophobic people, suggesting that lesbians can just choose to be straight and escape oppression/become “normal”. (Bindel, 2015, 2.40) What is misunderstood from this theory is that yes, lesbians can make that choice, but if they are not interested or sexually attracted, they shouldn’t have to be socially forced to do so. Many lesbians actually do make this choice in order to survive and stay alive in their countries. What is also misunderstood is that radical feminists are not entirely interested in performing genital sex,
as much as escaping imposed institution of heterosexuality and using this as a strategy to fight against the patriarchy, while also centering women in their activism and strengthening the bonds between them.

Bisexuality is also used as an argument against political lesbianism. I have encountered the results from the 10-years long research regarding bisexuality, done with 79 women who identify as lesbians, bisexual and “unlabelled”. (Diamond, 2009) The core explanations are that sexuality is fluid and changes over time, while most of the women from study choose not to identify as lesbians towards the end of the study, and went with “unlabelled”. The research also states that there is underrepresentation of bisexuality in the public discourse and that it is fluid over time and not just a phase. What the research misses are the social norms within society, the social trends (such as bisexuality) and expectations requested from women which are imposed form the early stages of their lives (such as getting married, having kids and being a housewife what is mostly available for heterosexual partnerships). It is not simply a fluid experience, rather a deeply rooted social construct, depending on many norms that have impact on it. As Sue Wilkinson writes: “bisexuality as fashion functions primarily to depoliticize sex. Women’s oppression in heterosex and lesbian feminist politics of resistance are both erased by an individualistic focus on pleasure, style and fashion. Lesbianism becomes no more than the latest trend – a girlfriend is a heterosexual woman’s fashion accessory, “lesbians” unproblematically have sex with men and the politics of lesbian feminism are obliterated. The “new” writing on bisexuality presages a return to sexual hedonism, in its clear privileging of desire over politics. Many contributors to this trend are utterly dismissive of lesbian feminism, which is seen as an idealistic 1970s throwback at best, and as a vindictive, “politically correct” moralism at worst. In this way, contemporary writing on bisexuality continues to be actively antieatical to radical/revolutionary lesbian feminism.” (Harne, Miller, 1996, 87)

Another argument used while opposing political lesbianism is that it is not possible to simply wake up one day and decide to be a lesbian. And it is not for all women, maybe some women do have this revelation, but within radical feminist movement, it is a conscious choice and political strategy to challenge the male dominated system. It might
not be easy choice, since heterosexuality is the norm within most society, and unlearning internalized misogyny towards other women and embracing female friendship and putting their value as political strategy is not an easy step to make. The end result will feel liberating, but however, it is a political stance and political decision to prioritize women in their activism, a choice and battle that might not be easy to make over night. (Bindel, 2009)

2.2 Female Friendships

Exiting heterosexuality is only one way to fight against male violence and male dominance in society. Female friendships are seen as important part of this fight. Trusting women, learning to love women was presented as crucial part within feminist movement in order to start developing theories and activism. Women are divided in patriarchy and learned that they are competition against each other, that women are each other’s worst enemy. Being a feminist means fighting for sisterhood and for female friendships, since women are socialized in the world that divides them and oppresses women to not provide love for them and other women. Showing affection for the same sex could be perceived as lesbianism which is still undesirable behavior. In the oppressive system, women have internalized to hate other women. Learning to love themselves and to love other women was (and still is) seen as revolutionary act, especially in the world where women are under constant tyranny of men and their main goal is to simply survive. It is revolutionary act to fight the hate towards other women, especially in the society where women recently gained some political and economical power, but are still seen as second class with expected gender roles to be performed. In this hierarchical man made tyranny, female friendships can be safe space for women, giving them strength and support. Raymond suggests that female friendship is what women should be fighting for, a necessary condition of a world in which women are not oppressed. “Women must ask not only what we are fighting against but also what we are fighting for. The destruction of female oppression and the development of female friendship go hand in hand.” Raymond says that feminists have not sufficiently stressed friendship as part of the struggle, part of the goal, and an integral part of life.” (Douglass, 1990, 205)
Practicing female friendships with women, gives example of the alternative world they are fighting for. It gives space to develop activism and support each others in the process. However, women need to build thoughtful and caring relationships and to choose their friendships. Women should be careful about having expectations that all women will be friends or that all feminists will provide friendships and invest themselves in friendships. This doesn’t mean that friendships are impossible or difficult, if anything they are desirable and necessary, but that we should take responsibilities regarding our expectations.

There are many examples throughout history of female friendships, which were not necessarily coming from the strict political grounds and from an organized feminist movement. Their decisions to prioritize women and stay in close relationships with them can be interpreted as the need to escape patriarchy and have a safe space for supporting each other. An earlier example of marriage resisters can be put into this context. I find that Marx’s concept of alienation interesting and that it explains the need for women to be together. Alienation means losing the control over the things, or over oneself. It disconnects people from the processes. The term alienation Marx uses is in connection to capitalism, alienating the workers from the process of creating the product, alienating workers from the means of production as well. It made me draw the connection with patriarchy and how women are alienated within the world, striped away from power and basic human rights throughout history and socialized into internalizing oppressive behaviors towards other women. As an experience that every woman has, it provides the example of the need women have over female friendships and sisterhoods, a collective strength accomplished through the solidarity of women and their common experiences of oppression.

As Janice Raymond states in her book *A Passion for Friends*: “This book is based on the conviction that it is not possible for women to be free, nor to be realistic about the state of female existence in a man-made world, nor to struggle against those forces that are waged against us all, nor to win, if we do not have a vision of female friendship – if women do not come to realize how profound are the possibilities of being for each other as well how deeply men have hidden these possibilities from us.” (Raymond, 1986, 207)
A woman without a men is a like a fish without a bicycle. Women strive for freedom and through these friendships they have been able to achieve it. Female friendships are also part of the political strategy, in gaining the autonomy in society and dismantling the male dominant systems. Men provide certain way how women should see themselves; within these friendships they are granted alternative ways to take a look on their image, or to deconstruct it and build a new one. Through these friendships they are not only rebuilding themselves, but providing the example for other women and helping other women through their processes. (Raymond, 1986, 239)

In conclusion themes from the literature review are compulsory heterosexuality, political lesbianism and female friendship; these are relevant to my research because I am interested in the relationship between the need for female companionship with political lesbianism; what are the motivations behind this choice.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methodological and Theoretical Perspective

In terms of research methods at the centre of the theoretical perspective adopted in the research is a feminist critical approach, “ways in which cultural assumptions, powers, discourses and social structures work for women to be oppressed and to perpetuate their own oppression could be explored”. (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p54) It is the principle theory I have decided to utilise in this research, since non-hierarchical, critical approach provides safer environment for women to open about intimate and yet political topic. Feminism also specifies that there is and intersect between power and different oppressive systems, including sex, race, nationality, age… Feminism provides analytical explanations on how women’s experiences are different than those of men. Women’s realities are shaped by gender they belong to, and feminism centers sex and gender roles in its theories. An approach which insures that women’s voices are priority was the main motivation to use it. Through these voices the critical theories of social norms have emerged. This was my crucial choice, because theories that center on these approaches will provide rich analysis and concrete analysis of the given subject.
3.2 Research Methods

This particular methodological perspective was chosen over others, primarily because feminism is based on women’s experiences and critical theories that question the norms in the society. In terms of research methods at the centre of the data collection strategy adopted in the research is qualitative analysis. Qualitative interviews will provide greater space for in depth analysis of the topic. I am more interested in hearing the experiences and motivation, than finding more women who are making this choice. Since the number of women who are leaving men is increasing, it would be difficult getting in contact with them, considering that not all of them see this as political choice and political act. Even with reaching more women, the number is still not representative which is why I haven’t decided to go with quantitative interviews and analysis. If the study adopted participatory research method as a principal form for data collection there is the risk that it would be time consuming, difficult to organize and observe and make interpretations based on that. It would provide work that is not quite simple to implement into a bachelors thesis essay. However, one advantage that the participatory method has over qualitative is that it would require getting more personal with women and the research, providing possibilities for more knowledge and more explanations of the phenomenon. Desktop/literature review and content analysis will also be used as research methods, for brief analysis of online articles regarding this subject. Taking notes and recording the interviews will be used in collecting the data. And the access to the data is the contacts I have with women who went through this process, who I had a chance to meet through various radical feminist events.

3.3 Ethics

In my work, as sociology student who is fulfilling her bachelor studies, I am following the rules of the International Sociology Association Code of Ethics (ISA). There will be informed consent and confidentiality. I will not impose my opinion or provide biased examples, regarding my personal connection to the topic. I am not under any sponsorship and my thesis does not provide the interest of any donor/fund/sponsors. I am not provided with any rewards for writing my thesis. While collecting my data, it will be presented that I am sociology student of Corvinus University of Budapest and what the purpose of
collecting the data is and what my thesis topic is. All the data gathered will be anonyms, their names will only be used if I have their consent and the need for that in my thesis. Before conducting any interviews, I will ask participant to sign the letter of consent, with the terms and conditions they should agree upon.

3.4 SWOT Analysis

*Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats*

Being familiar with the topic and actively engaged in the radical feminist movement provides me with the knowledge and resources needed to conduct this research. Having been part of different camps for radical feminist and organizing one, I have met women who are political lesbians and my friends, who provide me with the advantage and preserve my time regarding the interviews and collecting the experiences. It could also be seen as the weakness, whereas some topics/question might be too private or delicate to share, leaving me with incomplete interviews. Another threat/weakness is that not all of these women live in the same country. Having most, maybe even all of my interviews done online using social media (Skype, Facebook, Google Hangouts…) can be a challenge and a problem. Organizing the time that suits well the participant and I can be difficult, while Internet connection problem might occur also. There are however opportunities to gaining new knowledge through gathering this kind of information.

4. Data Analysis

This chapter of the thesis synthesizes and discusses the interviews conducted during my research. Due to problems regarding scheduling interviews, two of the participants have provided their answers in written form. Discussions during the interviews are categorized in broad topics. Since most of the interviewees share more or less the same political/activist experience, it has been challenging to categorize them. The first part of the analysis will cover the background history of women and their sexual orientation. The thesis then proceeds with the reasons behind this choice of political lesbianism in separate paragraph. The more detailed experiences are then described, how the process of exiting
heterosexuality, rejecting heterosexuality went, support groups during and after this process. The end of the chapter is followed with the importance of meeting lesbian feminist activists, how it influences political lesbianism and why it is needed.

I have also included citations from the interviews; quotes from women are presented in *italics* during this chapter.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natasha</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Online consultant</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivana</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Serbian</td>
<td>Consultant in lesbian organization</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jelena</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Serbian</td>
<td>Part time jobs</td>
<td>Psychology student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tijana</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Serbian</td>
<td>Jewelry designer</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolores</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
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<td>IT student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Feminist gift shop</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>Sociology student</td>
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<td>44</td>
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<td>Financial journalist</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>Painting houses</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanna</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>Apartment manager</td>
<td>Music student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.1 Background History

The literature review provided in the first chapters of this thesis is mostly supported by the participants through the interviews I have conducted. All of the questioned participants have practiced heterosexuality and have now exited heterosexuality. Interviews have been conducted with women from different countries, East and West (France, Spain, UK, Canada, Serbia, and Hungary), and different ages (women from 24-63), and feminist politics were the main drive in their experience with political lesbianism. Natasha stated that: *when I became a feminist, then I realized as a feminist, as a woman centered women, I was on this lesbian continuum as Adriane Rich writes about, when I realized that then I thought, well that’s wonderful, maybe I can go all the way with it, wouldn’t that be wonderful, then I can be with women and I’ve always loved women, and I knew that it was a choice, available to me.* Since the thesis topic explores mostly whether women have the need under patriarchy, to form sisterhoods with other women and bond with them, it was important to examine economic factors that could play a role in their choice for political lesbianism, as well as political situation in the countries they live in.

There were not great differences between East and the West, since the majority of the participants have based their choice on the politics coming from radical feminism and already had some activist background or some connections to activism. As Monica points out: *I am not an activist, but I am witnessing activism.* Other women are more invested in activism as organizers of different gatherings, events, discussions, writing blogs, or simply supporting protests. It has been shown that surviving under capitalism with part time jobs/self-employed status or working for the company did not have a great effect on this process. Age was not found to be a crucial factor, as much as having welcoming activist/radical feminist scene. More women were making this choice in the 1970’s, as Catherine explains: *Their environment created a possibility for that, because it was “normal”, and you are more likely to accept it as that because there are so many women in your surroundings, being critical, challenging the idea of born this way narrative. Reflecting on my own experience, my working position and environment around me did*
not have as much impact on my experience, as the need to be surrounded by women. Not having close activist circles only prolonged my process.

A majority of the interviewees felt that their surroundings (family and the state they live in) are liberal/in the middle between conservatives or neoliberals (regarding the countries and politics). This is open and pretty wide question and interpretation, but it is relevant to the literature review, since it supports the idea of the need/political choice of women to center women. The literature review contains segments of various experiences of women organizing women only spaces, throughout different historical periods, cultures, countries, political and economical system, religions. What I have noted during the interviews is that today, even if women perceive societies as more open or closed (conservative), they still live under patriarchy and therefore have desires to be with women. The first things that puts me off in a relationships with men, is that I really don’t want to be close to this male toxic shit, and violence, it is always about violence, them being violent and not knowing anything about women or female sexuality and stuff like that. Everything is so male centered and penis centered and I really don’t want to be close to this kind of experience.

4.2 Background History; Sexual Orientation

Women identified themselves as lesbians or political lesbians. I am a proud lesbian! Some of the interviewees stated. A majority of them have “used” political lesbianism as a tool of liberating themselves from men and do not use this term any more to describe themselves, political lesbianism was a “phase”. Hanna shares: I consider myself a full-on-lesbian, but I did go through political lesbian identifying phase. I will go into more detailed analysis of these experiences in the next section. Two of the participants have never used this term, even if they have made conscious choices to leave men and be with women, they did not come across this idea of choice while they were going through that process (maybe if they were familiar with the term at the time, they would use it). Three of the participants use the term political lesbian, as one of them explains the reasons behind it: I am a lesbian in every sense of the word (emotionally, romantically, sexually attracted to women), but I use the word political because I was able to be a lesbian because of feminism. This comment was one a very significant experience for me while conducting the research, because the
explanation is so simple, and yet covers everything. My whole life, my activism was centering on women, I do feel as a lesbian in every sense of the word, and I was able to go through this process of exiting heterosexuality because of feminism. From the stated sentence, it is suggested that women do not have a chance to practice lesbianism, because of compulsory heterosexuality and feminism was a space that provided alternative explanations and political strategies and acts of resistance.

One interviewee stated that the word choice might not be the best way to describe our relationship with sexuality, if we can choose it or not, pointing out the question of how much choice we can have, as women, in patriarchal society. Women can choose not to act on some desires that are put on us, women can’t choose to be attracted to other women, but they can develop and learn this attraction. These comments suggest that the topics of political lesbianism and sexuality are quite complex. This data confirms the literature review regarding the also complex definitions between sociologists and radical feminists. I expected the research to reveal that radical feminists are not synchronized on every topic and every term, which brought broader knowledge to this thesis. It also opened new suggestions to other topics that could have been part of this thesis, such as choice under patriarchy and how do we define it, when are we actually empowered enough to say that we are making the choice. Or what standards need to be satisfied in order for women to be able to make a choice. All of these questions are important and interesting, unfortunately too broad for this thesis topic.

All of the other participants have stated that they believe that women can make a choice regarding their sexuality. Yes, absolutely! Sexuality is politically constructed, we are thought that we are innately heterosexual; it is obvious that it is forced upon us, process is challenging but it is possible. Others have pointed out that they agree it is a choice; it was part of their experience and they see sexuality as constructed in society, but this does not make it an easy choice, rather difficult experience that requires a lot of self-reflection and work. I would argue from personal experience, that this choice is challenging and difficult, and through these interviews I have realized that other women also share this pathway.
4.3 Reasons Behind the Choice

All of the women who were interviewed have made this choice/gone through this process because of feminism. One of them points out: *Through feminism you start to notice women, and to see them as people.* Most of them have been struggling with body image issues, because of social norms through which all of the women are subjected (expected to be quite, pretty by the standards of the society, slim, performing femininity…). *The reason why I could never be with a woman, to be sexual with women is because I hated my own body. Whole my life I was thought to worship the penis, please them (men) and when you think about your own body, it is gross, it is smelly, it menstruates, I realized that I actually don’t like my own vagina.* Some women have expressed that they hated their own bodies, and have also internalized misogynistic, anti lesbian opinions towards other women. As one of the interviewees stated: *I was even offended if my mom would call me a lesbian as a joke, and she did that as a joke because I didn’t have a boyfriend for a long time, and I was offended (for being labeled lesbian). Because what it meant, well it was basically an insult. You are not a real woman, so you must be a lesbian; you are something less than what is expected of you.* Unlearning these patterns, becoming aware of how the world works in heteropatriarchy, what kind of expectations are put on women and encouraging women not to compromise with relationships that do not satisfy them, they have done through feminism. The comment from one of the participants, *through feminism you start to notice women, and to see them as people,* actually explains the best that experience and that process.

One of the participants explains: *feminism forced me to become a lesbian, once you want to be in sync with your ideas, if you are a feminist, you think women are worth it, women are beautiful, deserve to be considered as real human beings, well why wouldn’t you be in love with women. Yes, it (feminism) helped me. And then to be able to express myself, to be myself, to find out everything that a woman can be, I needed to be with women, and then I became a separatist, almost right away. I wanted to be only with women. I didn’t want to do all the things women do, just to care (for men). This comment suggests that in some way, through feminism, becoming a lesbian is not a choice anymore. Because*
understanding heteropatriarchy, leaves no other choice for women, but to quit their relationships with men, stop being emotional labor and stop reproducing everything women are socialized to perform in society. Reflecting on my own experience while exiting heterosexuality, loving women and choosing women left me no choice in some way, but to leave men and devote my energy and time to women. Through feminism I started valuing women more, and caring for female friendships more.

Women entered feminism through feminist theory, joining activist groups or attending radical feminist events. Through these activities they have encountered the idea of political lesbianism. Feminist activism was a huge part of my life before becoming a lesbian; and this is a really good environment to be in, especially cause it is supportive, it’s really empowering. As another interviewee points out: Learning that women don’t have to be with men (through feminism). There were different factors that they pointed out which had the crucial role for them going into this process of leaving men.

Two of the participants shared that this was a “coming home” process for them, probably the main factor why they made this choice. Monica: It was exciting, as if I found where I belong.

Tijana: Everything else was very difficult for me, having sex with men was disgusting for me. I realized that I never enjoyed sex in my life, until I had sex with a woman. And this first experience with a woman was really nice, because I fell in love, I was madly in love with this woman, and then everything was good, it was great, it was beautiful. I felt like I am home.

Some women have pointed out that choosing women is a form of taking care of themselves, practicing self love. I enjoyed it more to be with women, both emotionally and sexually, basically it was better than men, I knew that it would be very good for me (lesbianism), it would be a form of self love, treating myself right. And not participating in the reproduction of heteropatriarchy, not being an active part in it, in that way. Personally, it was very, very important not being controlled by men. Another interviewee stated that: male violence – that was part of it (part of one of the main factors of the choice) and radical feminism – opening my eyes, which though me to love myself as a woman and to
love other women. These comments can be linked with the literature review I have provided. Women strive for company of women and political lesbianism was one of the ways they found how to escape compulsory heterosexuality. I did not see much point in spending time with women, fighting and organizing with women, and then sharing the bed with a man. I was not concerned about the fact that the man I dated was caring or not, it was simply the need for self care, more equal relationships. Rejecting heterosexuality and making the choice not to reproduce it in society was a form of practicing self love which was important for me at the time.

Another factor that was shared is sexual preference. Through radical feminist theory women were able to rethink sex, outside of the patriarchal definition of it (heterosexual, penis in vagina sexual intercourse). Also, I do prefer to have sex with women, it is the only way I want to have sex for the rest of my life. It is more acceptable way of having sex. Understanding through my feminism that men can never ever give me what I need, what I want in a partner, even in a sexual way, it is also a sexual preference. I never want a penis ever again. It could be that the interviewees met men who are selfish, focused on their own satisfaction and not familiar with the female body, which led them to making this choice. Or that practicing sex that includes a penis is simply not interesting or satisfying as being intimate with women.

Two interviewees stated that one of the main factors was feeling like she is part of the revolution and act of resistance, and a conscious choice to be free. It was to discover that I could have a life with other women, it was excitement of feeling like I am part of the revolution, big change with women, knowing that those women want to be everything they are, not caring about what society thinks, and being able to do it because there were hundreds and hundreds of us. Hanna stated: There was a clear political understanding that it is an act of resistance, that is very important for me, there was also clear desire to have non abusive relationships and equal relationships, men have the power outside the house, outside the bedroom, so there was no hope to have equal relationship with them, that was really important for me, wanted something based on respect, equality, actual love and you can’t have that with somebody who is socially superior.
I made a conscious choice, I thought I was heterosexual my whole life, but the 8 last years (of being sexually active), I just could not develop a relationship with a man, I only had sexual encounters but they were all very bad and I didn’t enjoy them and I ended up realizing that I don’t enjoy being with men and they also hurt me a lot in the past, so a lot of sexual trauma, and I just couldn’t trust them anymore and I just made a conscious choice not to engage with them anymore. Answers like these raise interesting points on how political lesbianism is one of the ways of addressing the problem of patriarchy. Women are fighting against the patriarchal system, and it is through the connection with other women that they feel empowered, strong, free, having a life.

One of the interviewers has shared her interesting points which I have decided to put in this separate paragraph. Really important part of this, one really important thing – after giving birth to my daughter, I didn’t want to have sex with my husband anymore, the way I experienced the sex with him was extremely upsetting because I felt very angry at being penetrated by men, so whenever he would try to penetrate me, it felt like rape, it felt like power, it felt horrible. One of the main reasons why I have started this topic for my thesis is because of the articles regarding married women, mostly mothers who are leaving their husbands and engaging in lesbian relationships. Her statement could be interesting in exploring if motherhood plays a role in this choice, or could be a biological factor that drives women to become lesbians. Maybe reproducing fulfils some biological “need” that we had and once it has been performed, we are no longer in need for men. This is just one of the theories that would be very interesting for me to explore and if I have been granted more time and resources, probably something I would enjoy learning more about and searching more about. Childbirth is an extremely emotional experience, where men maybe fail to be supportive for women during and after the process, which could affect the relationship.

Craving for women’s company, the most important thing, male sexual violence, shifting focus from men to women, love towards women and exiting men’s world – at least emotionally, sexual preference, female companionship, are the politics/reasons/main factors behind the choice for women to leave men. While going through these interviews and
quotes from women, it is noticeable that they have relevance to the literature review which
demonstrates that women have the need to be with other women, and political lesbianism
was one of the steps in helping them in that process. Hating men and escaping men is only
one part. Sometimes when we talk about political lesbians, you only see the hating men
thing. Obviously when you are a lesbian you reject men, whether you are political lesbian
or not, it is a political act whether you see it or not, but it also comes with: Look at what
you have not been looking at before, at all the women out there! So it is not just a
movement that is negative towards men, it is a loving movement towards women, and these
two things go hand in hand, it is not one or the other, it’s both.

4.4 How Did This Process Look Like?

As I have written in the chapters before, women have come across the idea of political
lesbianism through feminism. Some of them have read about it, others have learned about it
through social media (facebook groups, tumblr) or feminist groups. I was on tumblr and
there I met political lesbians. And I was like, oh my god, I didn’t know about this phrase –
political lesbian. And I was like, oh my god; this is a thing I didn’t know then!
It was on tumblr. I had studied radical feminism in university, but they didn’t mention
anything regarding political lesbianism. Then eventually, I found radical feminist
community on tumblr, and that’s how I found about Andrea Dworkin and that lead me to
Sheila Jeffreys and political lesbianism.

Other women shared the fact that through facebook groups they had more encounters and
discussions on this topic. Up until this day, it is still a pretty “controversial” topic between
radical feminists and lesbian activists. Women mostly defend two categories: born this way
or socially constructed categories regarding sexuality. I have tried to include this in my
analysis, to observe the discussions within radical feminist groups I am part of on
Facebook. Since I am involved in the topic and it is important personal experience, I had
trouble just following and in many cases I engaged in the discussions, explaining the
ideology behind political lesbianism or simply sharing my experience. Because I failed to
simply observe how these processes go, I decided not to include this in my thesis. Online
activism brought new ideas regarding this topic and how it can be explored. It left me with
new projects I could do, such as starting the blog and explaining in details political lesbianism, since it is not the most understood idea. If I pursue a master degree, observing social media would probably be included and important part to explore.

Interviewees were separated into two groups, explaining the process of rejecting heterosexuality as being difficult or easy.

A small group of participants stated that it was difficult, challenging, long process and not an easy path. *It was challenging and full of analysis of my past relationships and a lot of doubt, do I deserve this; there were a lot of questionings.* This suggests that unlearning patriarchal norms regarding our relationships with other women is challenging, but manageable. Even if most of these women did consider themselves as feminist during this process, it is notable that they still had a lot of shame and doubt as women; they still carried a lot of learned behavior from the patriarchal system. *It was hard, because of the failure of LGBT communities, because you have a sense from the outside, if you are not gay from the day one, if you didn’t know it when you were young, like I didn’t have that story, that essentialist crap. I realized that I could be interested in women, but I felt that I might not be accepted.* Others pointed out that it is not only an individual’s “fault”. Not having radical feminist communities and political feminist and lesbian organizations makes this process of exiting heterosexuality more difficult. It is not only on the woman to “work” on herself, but also responsibility of the community (lesbian, feminist) to be supportive and recognize the importance of this political act. I did not have a community around me while making this decision, which made the process more difficult, however, the need for women and female companionship was an important drive in this process and made it possible for me.

The majority of women, who were surrounded by political lesbians or who were more confident in themselves, found this process easy, something *that came naturally, like it is supposed to be like this, nice, soothing, it felt good.* Another interviewee states: *It wasn’t difficult, I was exploring, and it was exciting! As if I found where I belong!*

On the question of how long this process was it varied for all the participants. For some it took a month/couple of months of thinking about this idea and making the choice not to be
with men, for others it was a long process of couple of years, unlearning lesbophobia and accepting the fact that they can deconstruct their own sexuality and become a lesbian. One of the interviewees Catherine stated: *Maybe you can say it is a lifelong process.* This comment implies what I have also presented in the literature review, the need that women have for sisterhood (which can be defined in various ways). Making the choice might not be so difficult, but having women as support, being in empowering surroundings and having representation were one of the main points that helped women in this choice, supported them in not feeling alone. Being surrounded with women, who share the experience of growing up under patriarchy, seems to be one of the main reasons why women chose political lesbianism.

Some of the participants were in radical feminist circles while they were going through this process, *lots of support and encouragement, very warm happy community to be part of.* Almost all of them had a positive feedback from their friends and family (the ones who are close with their families and had the need to share this process with their families). Some of them had negative comments online, in Facebook groups, because they are not “the true lesbians” (implying that they were not born that way), but besides that there were not major negative experiences. One thing that I find interesting is how women would react if they did not have this support or positive feedbacks. One of the participants shared her story of coming out as a lesbian when she was 19, and because she did not have representation around her, nor lesbian friends, she engaged in relationships with men. *Being in a relationship with a man made me realize that I do not want to be with men, but I didn’t have community and heterosexuality was “safe” because nobody would question my lesbianism.* She was not satisfied and happy in this relationship, which is why after 13 years of being with a man, she decided to leave him. One thing that she recalls what triggered her to make this decision, was meeting more and more lesbians, some of them while playing football. *I remember meeting them and wanting to be like them.* (She describes being like them meant being free)
4.5 Meeting Other Political Lesbians

A majority of the women had a chance to meet other political lesbians in real life. *Yes! And it was the best! It was in women only spaces!*  

*I met women in real life, in lesbian spaces, oh online didn’t exist back then!* The women who had this chance are from Western countries, where the movement of political lesbianism is more present, organized, or at least it used to be. Women from Serbia and Hungary first met them online, through Facebook groups.

For all of them, meeting political lesbians was a crucial experience. *Absolutely essential, because without them I wouldn’t even have the idea of it.* Another woman, Sonia, pointed out that *it was a matter of life or suicide,* and meeting radical feminist/political lesbians was important, because meeting likeminded women meant that *you are not crazy.* Hanna: *Super important. I feel like this political lesbianism is the first step of even allowing you to be a lesbian, otherwise it would’ve been pretty hard to get to the place where I am now. And now I am fully fucking sure I am a lesbian, there is no doubt anymore, just to have this mental permission. It was helpful.*

One of the participants stated: *It was very important, if I ever met any of the women earlier, how amazing it would’ve been that I met them when I was young, to tell me that I can be a lesbian, to have friends who will take care of me and stop me from entering male relationships.*

4.6 My Answers to the Questions

With the reference to the questions set my responses would be as follows. I am 25 years old, from Serbia, but currently living in Hungary, where I study and work part time. With the kind of work I do, in the touristic shop, I can’t economically be independent, which is not a problematic situation for me since I have been granted a scholarship for my studies. I share a flat, with a roommate, but maybe one day I would like to live in a community. Regarding the political environment in the country where I am from, situation is in between, conservative, but welcoming neoliberal policies regarding EU. In Hungary I have
been in my international bubble, so I am not sure how much the society is actually conservative. With the reference to the question about my family, they are not more traditionally oriented. In response to the question if I am an activist and if I can afford economically to be one, I would state that I am, and also that I can afford to be active within feminist movement, and it is extremely important part of me, no matter how difficult it is, I do not see the point without activism. Regarding the question about my sexuality, I identify as political lesbian. That would be the best way to describe myself, since my activism was always with lesbians, my main interests were always in lesbians, my love for women also, but I prefer to say political lesbian since it describes the best my journey and my history. On the matter of whether women can choose their sexuality or not, I would state that they can, since I consider sexuality as a social construct, not solely something we are born with. As for the question about radical feminist ideas, I am familiar with them and I have experience within the movement, such as organizing protests and women’s gathering. In terms of how I made the choice to be become a lesbian, my response would be that it simply did not make sense to go back to the guy I was dating, after spending my time with women and organizing with women. Not because he is such a bad guy, but because I did not feel like I have so much to share with him, my activism was and still is about women and I wanted to continue sharing my love life with a woman. While spending time with women, we helped each other to deal with much insecurity, we encouraged each other to grow and change what we do not like, and heterosexual intercourse was also one of the things that I did not enjoy so much. So it became painful (physically and emotionally) to be intimate with men, especially after being intimate with women and working with women. My politics behind this choice where prioritizing women in my life and putting women first. While dating men I did not find that possible, they take too much time and a lot of debating and explaining which I was not interested in providing anymore and I felt that I have lost a lot of my years on that. Regarding the question about my family and friends, they were welcoming and understanding during this process. Only some men that I know had comments of disagreeing on my choice, thinking that it is stupid, but that is all. With reference to the question how I heard about it and how did the process look like, I would like to share that it was from a friend, while we were camping. She was sharing her activist
life story, and mentioned that she was a political lesbian one part of her life, but does not use that anymore to define herself. That was in 2015, and this idea got stuck with me since then. The process was very hard, because it happened while I was dating this guy. And I shared this with him, that it does not make sense to me to be with men anymore and that I am considering to leave him and not date men ever again. He had many comments regarding that, and I was very insecure which made the whole process harder, I was questioning myself a lot, thinking that I am stealing someone’s identity, that I cannot be with women since I was with men, it was extremely difficult. It was about 2 years long process, and realizing that I do not want to spend time on men was final decision. On the matter of main factors that had the crucial role for my choice, I would name all of them, ending male supremacy, love for women, economic reasons, sexual preference, but the main one would be the desire for female companionship. Regarding the question about the coming out story and support from the community, I can state that I never really came out, since it was not like I was hiding, but all of my friends were extremely happy that I have dumped men. I was not able to find the political lesbian community during this process of exiting heterosexuality, only at some women’s gatherings, so I had a chance to meet them in real life and online also. And their reasons for making this decision were similar to mine. In response to the question about how important it was to meet other women who share this experience, I would say life important, since I felt alone and so lost. Knowing that there were other women going through the same process was so liberating and calming, and that I am not alone. And in some way, I felt that I am part of certain female group, it was such a welcoming feeling, even if I was not physically close to these women. As for the last question regarding forming the group and if I have consider further developing this theory and practice, I can state that I am interested in making the blog as the starting position, since there are not so many things on political lesbianism, many women do not understand the concept of it.
5. Conclusion

This thesis explores the need women have to be with other women, the main question was to explore political lesbianism as a tool of liberation and centering other women in their lives.

I have consulted the relevant literature and approached this topic through the experiences of women, their histories and reasons to make this choice and focusing mainly on why they did it and how did this process go. A review of the history of political lesbianism as a movement showed that it still has an impact on women and it is still a relevant movement within radical feminist.

Exploring reasons behind this choice/process, women have mostly shared their need to be surrounded by other women and that through radical feminism they have accepted women as human beings, and through political lesbianism they understood and accepted that they have a choice to be lesbians. Becoming a lesbian was not solely because of sexual preference, it was an act of political resistance, a conscious choice against male tyranny and it is a political choice because relationships between men and women are political.

In conclusion, the interviews I have conducted support my hypothesis and the literature review I have provided. Political lesbianism is a theory and practice that women perform, through which they are unlearning the misogyny and accepting women in their lives. Whether women making this choice come from East or the West, or whatever the age, it is never too late for going through this process. Being a radical feminist; wanting to be women centered and to create the world for women, and using political lesbianism as a movement for that, were just the steps towards revolutionary acts of fighting for deconstruction of female oppression and fighting for women.

I have a lot of positive feelings stemming this thesis for instance reflecting on my experiences and making comparisons. I believe that this topic could be further researched and hope to do so in future MA studies. Conducting interviews simply opened up so many questions that I could have covered, or I did not put too much attention to (such as the
question of choice and how much we actually have it under patriarchy). I would love to interview more women who are lesbians and who oppose this movement, to explore their reasons behind it. And interviewing women who started this movement would be an absolute thrill! How do they see it now, are they still active, and what do they think about the future? It would be also constructive to explore online debates or how women approach this topic in women gatherings or in their radical feminist groups (if they do it at all). I had a chance to interview two mothers and I would love to interview more women who are not radical feminists, but they did make this choice to leave men. I would love to hear their experiences and how they found out about it (was it through mainstream media for example). My initial interest in the topic was through online articles of women who are leaving their husbands and children to be with their female partners. Unfortunately it was challenging to find women outside of the radical feminist circles and it would have been time consuming for this bachelor thesis. I would be curious to interview women who went back to dating men (while finishing my data analysis I have remembered that I do have two friends who actually started dating men again). It would be very important to examine how their community sees them now, and to hear their experience and reasons to why they chose men back in their lives. There are so many other very interesting topics that emerged during the interviews I have conducted. Another very important part while finishing this thesis, was realization how Eurocentric it is, and white. I have failed to include women of color, which leaves this thesis without the critique of race and further knowledge on different experiences. Intersectionality would be approach I would utilize while continuing this topic. From these interviews, I have realized that raising awareness regarding political lesbianism, and putting an effort into explaining this idea to women, would be very helpful as a support for other women questioning their sexuality or the ones exiting heterosexuality. Maybe even small pamphlets, blog posts with Q and A (questions and answers) parts where the main misconceptions about political lesbianism are debunked would be very helpful for women who are afraid to publicly speak about questioning their sexuality. Since it might be difficult to have support groups in real life, because there is less and less lesbian activist places, having an online space where this topic is discussed could be one way of support for women who are making the choice of leaving men.
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Appendix

Consent form

Information Letter and Consent Form for Invitation to be Interviewed

Date

Dear ___________________________

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my BA degree in the Institute of Sociology at the Corvinus University. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.

This study will focus on Political Lesbianism, reasons behind women choices

Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately 60 minutes. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences by advising the researcher. With your permission, the interview will be voice-recorded but if you are unhappy with this I can make written notes. Only I and my examiners will have access to the recording. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any report resulting from this study; however, with your permission anonymous quotations may be used.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at +36703587705 or by e-mail at natalijalaptosevic@yahoo.com. You can also contact my supervisor, Andrew Ryder at e-mail: andrew.ryder@uni-corvinus.hu

I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

Sincerely, (Signature)
CONSENT FORM

I have read the above information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Natalija Laptošević of the Department of Sociology at Corvinus University.

I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be voice recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses.

I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the class hand-in and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous.

I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study. (yes/no)

I agree to have my interview voice recorded. (yes/no)

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any class hand-in or publication that comes of this research. (yes/no)

Participant’s Name _____________________________

Participant’s Signature _____________________________ Date __________

Researcher’s Signature _____________________________ Date __________
Interview questions

1. How old are you, and where are you from?
2. Are you a student or do you work? (or both)
3. If yes, what kind of work do you have and can you be economically independent in your country?
4. Do you live alone, or in a community? – would you like to live alone or in the community?
5. In what kind of environment do you live regarding your country, is it more liberal or conservative?
6. What about your family, are they more traditionally oriented?
7. Are you active within feminist movement? Can you afford to be an activist?
8. Is activism important part of your life and identity?
9. How do you identify regarding your sexuality?
10. Do you consider yourself to be a political lesbian?
11. Do you consider that women can choose their sexuality? If yes, why?
12. Are you familiar with radical feminist ideas and do you have some experience regarding radical feminism?
13. If yes, could you provide some examples of your activism/interest in radical feminism?
14. If no, would you share why you are not interested in radical feminist activism?
15. How did you make a choice to become a lesbian?
16. What are your politics behind this choice and motivation?
17. What kind of reaction did you receive while going through this process? – From family, or activist circles?
18. Could we go more into the details of your choice, how did you hear about it?
19. How did this process look like? – was it challenging, difficult…
20. How long did it take you to make this choice and what was the main reason that pushed you to do it?
21. Could you name the main factors that played the crucial role for your choice? Was it feminist activism – ending male supremacy, or love for women, or economic reasons, or sexual preference, was it all altogether?

22. Did you find the support from your community once you came out as a lesbian?

23. Were you able to find the political lesbian community or to meet some other women who identify the same?

24. Have you met these women online or in real life?

25. What are their reasons for making this choice?

26. How important it was for you to meet other women who share this experience?

27. Have you felt that you are part of certain female group, based on making this choice?

28. Have you considered forming a group and further developing this theory and practice?