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Greek Life is a predominant part of college culture in the United States of America. Fraternities and sororities are gender segregated social and living groups that claim to foster lasting bonds among its members and provide a support system for students when they are on college campuses away from their families. Many sororities claim that it is their goal to provide an environment for young women that helps them live up to their highest potential academically, and socially. Sororities are often established with the goal to unify and empower women on college campuses through sisterhood. The gender segregation within the Greek organizations have historically been based on the gender binary. Therefore, they have been a main reinforces of socially constructed genders and have exclusively empowered individuals who fit those identities. Furthermore, the relationships built within a Greek organization; sisterhoods and brotherhoods, assume heterosexuality. Due to this nature of the Greek System, it has historically excluded the transgender and the LGBTQ community. Finally, due to the assumed heteronormativity, this system has continuously taught young men and women that it is only normal to identify heterosexual males and females. I argue that it is a very difficult task, if not impossible, to empower women as a whole within a system that does not recognize gender and sexual fluidity.

In this paper, I will demonstrate how sororities construct and reinforce gender by offering an overview of recent studies done on the role of sororities in the construction of gender in Lafayette College and other educational institutions. The first Lafayette female students felt the need for sororities on campus due to the marginalization of women in the times male dominated atmosphere. Women demanded women's social programs in hopes that it would give them more voice in the community. However, the backlash of their attempt to fight against the patriarchy using a patriarchal system, is clearly evident in the increasing number of women suffering from body image disorders and objectification today.

Women in Lafayette 1970:

After multiple years of debating, in September of 1970 the board of trustees of Lafayette College voted 19 to 9 in favor of admitting women¹. However, The College still did not have resource available for women who joined the community. The lack of residential halls, dining halls and social programs was a major challenge for most female students. Women had to go to fraternity houses in order to eat because that was the only dining option available. In addition, women often felt marginalized because most of the public spaces and social events were male centered and dominated. In order to address these issues the college established The Committee on Women's Social Programs. This Committee was appointed to identify the needs of the female students on campus and to address those needs².

The Committee on Women's Social Programs formed in September of 1976:

In the Report of The Committee on Women's Social Programs it is stated that this Committee was "organized as a result of questions raised by a number of women students regarding availability of dining options for women and as a result of an interest in the formation of sororities at Lafayette"³. In order to obtain an accurate overview of the female students' needs and demands The Committee on Women's social Issues prepared a questionnaire. The Questionnaire was sent out on October 1976 and all the 580 female students and 288 students responded. The questionnaire asked students if they felt the need for "a limited number of social organizations for women". Furthermore it asked them to rank their choices

¹ Lafayette Coed in 1970: <http://sites.lafayette.edu/coeducation/>, Lafayette College Archives

² Report of The Committee on Women's Social Programs (September 1976), Lafayette. College Archives

³ Report of The Committee on Women's Social Programs (September 1976), Lafayette. College Archives

between "social residential halls with dining room, social clubs with open membership, national sororities and coed social residential halls"⁴.

Based on the results of this survey there was a high demand for social organizations for women. However, there were varying opinions on the type of organizations that the students showed interest in. The result of the survey showed that "Approximately 75% of the students who responded believed that something was needed in the form of social organizations for women." Furthermore, 50% of the respondents indicated interest social residential halls and social clubs and 25% of the respondents claimed they would join a sorority. The students were also asked to state if they opposed to the formation of any of the above mentioned social groups and one third of the respondents claimed they were opposed to having sororities on Lafayette College campus⁵. No opposition was expressed against any of the other two social programs suggested.

After analyzing the results of the survey, the Committee on Women's Social Programs organized meetings with women's residential halls to further discuss the question of women's social groups. Once again the majority of the students agreed that women would immensely benefit from residential halls with dining halls and social clubs with open membership. However, there seemed to be disagreements among the student body about the establishment of sororities in Lafayette College. Students who supported the presence of sororities claimed that sororities would help them develop "strong ties of sisterhood, unity, close comradeship and feeling comfortable in a limited group". However, a considerably larger number of students opposed to sororities claiming that sororities would "foster pettiness and

⁴ Report of The Committee on Women's Social Programs (September 1976), Lafayette. College Archives

⁵ Report of The Committee on Women's Social Programs (September 1976), Lafayette. College Archives

elitism". Regardless of the significant opposition to sororities, Lafayette College welcomed the first sororities on campus in 1978⁶.

A Greek organization that wanted to open a chapter on Lafayette College has to appeal to be recognized by the college administration as a living group. Lafayette College's Recognition Policy for Living Groups asks the applicants to provide a proposal outlining specific purposes of the group among other things. One of the Greek Organizations that appealed to establish a chapter at Lafayette College; Delta Zeta Sorority, stated that the organization's purpose is to "unite its members in the bonds of sincere and lasting friendships and to stimulate one another in the pursuit of knowledge". In addition, in the biographical sketch provided to the college this organization claims that is "dedicated to the most complete encouragement and development of each member's highest potential"⁷. Most sororities claim to priorities and deeply value developing lasting bonds and seeking academic excellence. Therefore, some Lafayette women felt like being a part of a sorority would be a fulfilling and empowering experience for them.

Feminist intentions:

The establishment of The Committee of Women's Social Programs was a step toward making Lafayette a more female friendly and inclusive environment. Lafayette College recognized that it is crucial for a college to provide equal resources to students of all genders and took necessary steps to make that happen. Women in Lafayette voiced their needs and fought for their right to equal resources. Among many other social programs, Lafayette women demanded that they establish sororities on Campus. These women expressed that sororities would help women on campus unite and develop strong and supportive bonds. These

⁶ Report of The Committee on Women's Social Programs (September 1976), Lafayette College Archives

⁷ Biographical Sketch of Delta Zeta Sorority (1980), Lafayette College Archives.

women intended to use the sorority structure to empower themselves and the women around them. On a basic level sororities can be viewed as feminist organizations that offers a safe space for women and fosters unity among female collegians. However, more often than not, these institutions have functioned as the constructors and reinforces of gender roles on American college campuses.

Current Research on Sororities:

Even though most sororities claim to unite and empower women, some research on these organizations suggest that sororities can in fact contribute dominant misogynistic culture. Some studies done on sororities have concluded that these organizations disempower women by overemphasizing the value of their appearance and reduce them to objects of pleasure for men. Furthermore, research has shown that due to the focus on appearance, sororities have been contributors to the increasing rates of eating disorders and mental health issues among college women. A study done Linda B. Arthur, *Dress and the Social Construction of Gender in Two Sororities*, clearly demonstrates the role that sororities play in construction and reinforcement of gender roles. Arthur argues that the sororities included in this study not only construct an idealized image for women but also train women to perform and master that image. Furthermore these sororities actively seek women who portray feminine appearance and behavior, and exclude women who refuse to perform these socially constructed gender roles.

Arthur conducts a study to demonstrate the social construction of gender in sororities. Her study takes place in a predominantly Caucasian State University in the Pacific Northwest with sorority membership of 19% in 1984. She collects her data mainly through observation, field notes and interviews and takes a qualitative approach. She picks 2 sororities out of 15, after

conducting a survey asking 50 women to describe "the appearance of the members of each sorority". Members of these Greek life organizations referred their sororities as "high houses" for the most popular and "low houses" for the least popular sorority. Sororities that were considered high houses were believed to consist of members who were considered "the most attractive, were highly social and came from higher socioeconomic classes". On the other hand members of the "low houses" were "less physically attractive, less wealthy, and participated in fewer social activities"⁸.

Arthur chooses to study one "high house", Beta Beta Beta (BBB) and one "low house", Alpha Alpha Alpha (AAA) for the purposes of her study. Arthur conducted individual and group interviews that aimed to investigate family background, demographics, gender roles and social construction of gender among sorority members. Arthur discovered that most members of both sororities came from traditional Christian families. However, most members of AAA came lower and middle class families while members of BBB came from upper class families⁹.

Furthermore, Arthur discovered that most sororities aimed to live up a certain image in order to gain status among the Greek life organizations. Arthur claims that "the major goal of the sororities is to produce educated, ladylike, refined and beautiful young women." In order to achieve this goal sororities paid significant attention to the women's appearance before admitting them and once admitted, they are trained to dress and behave "ladylike" by offering classes on etiquette. Liz, a sorority member claimed that these classes teach women "table manners, how to dress for various occasions, and how not to let dresses send the wrong signals"¹⁰. These

⁸ Arthur, LB. Dress and the Social Construction of Gender in Two Sororities. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. 17(2), 84-93, 1998.

⁹ Arthur, LB. Dress and the Social Construction of Gender in Two Sororities. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. 17(2), 84-93, 1998.

¹⁰ Arthur, LB. Dress and the Social Construction of Gender in Two Sororities. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. 17(2), 84-93, 1998.

organizations create an ideal image highly based on socially constructed gender roles and train young women to perform these gender roles in order to gain acceptance and status in the community. Consequently teaching young girls that their success in life is purely tied to their level of attraction.

In addition, these sororities reinforced these gender roles by equating the commitment to the gender role to commitment to the organization. The most committed members of the sorority invested a significant amount of time, energy and money on achieving what Arthur calls the "idealized image". Arthur goes on to define the "idealized image" as "fashionable, classy, thin tanned, feminine, well dressed and blonde"¹¹. The most popular sorority on campus, or the "high house" is the sorority that is perceived to be the most attractive based on the above mentioned standards. Women who are committed to gaining and maintaining that status are rewarded for it and women fail to do so are punished. Being the best object of desire by men is considered the award for behaving based on these gender roles. By overemphasizing and overvaluing only physical appearance of the members, sororities construct the role of women as aesthetically pleasing and the object of man's desire.

Sororities in Lafayette College:

Almost a decade after the study done by Arthur, sororities still play a major role in constructing gender and reinforcing socially constructed gender roles. A study done at Lafayette College sheds lights on the dangers of the social construction of gender to women's physical and mental health. The Study done by Basow, Foran and Bookwala aims demonstrate correlations between body image and eating disorders among women who affiliate affiliation with sororities and women who dont. This study hypothesizes that "women belonging

¹¹ Arthur, LB. Dress and the Social Construction of Gender in Two Sororities. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. 17(2), 84-93, 1998.

to sororities as well as those who intend to join would score higher than non sorority and first year women no intention to join on these measures of disordered eating, body objectification and social pressure. It also predicts that the amount of time spent living in a sorority house as well as degree of social pressure would correlate positively with higher scores on body objectification and disordered eating".¹²

The participants in this study included 99 women from all six sororities who were either initiated or were going through the initiation process. This group consisted of sophomore, junior and senior students. In addition 49 first year students who intended on joining Greek life and 37 student who did not intend to join Greek life. The remaining 80 participants were non sorority women were from all different classes. Based on the result of a questionnaire that requested age, race, height and weight, the participants were traditionally aged, 84% white and came from upper-middle-class families. This study measured disordered eating behavior, body objectification and social pressure using various standard measurement and questionnaires. The results supported the hypothesis that sorority women at Lafayette College are more likely to be at risk of developing eating disorders compared to not affiliated women. Furthermore that the longer a sorority member lived in the sorority house would increase her disordered eating behaviors and body objectification due to peer pressure.¹³

Anti-Feminist Structure:

Why is it that an organization established for the purpose of empowering and uniting women actively disempowers them by objectifying them and segregated them by creating a

¹² BASOW, SA; FORAN, KA; BOOKWALA, J. Body Objectification, Social Pressure, and Disordered Eating Behavior in College Women: The Role of Sorority Membership. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 31, 4, 394-400, Dec. 1, 2007.

¹³ BASOW, SA; FORAN, KA; BOOKWALA, J. Body Objectification, Social Pressure, and Disordered Eating Behavior in College Women: The Role of Sorority Membership. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 31, 4, 394-400, Dec. 1, 2007.

hierarchy of femininity? I argue that sororities have and will continue fail at being feminist organizations because they are established within a system that is inherently exclusive. Greek life organizations are established under the assumption that humans are cisgender and heterosexual. This is clearly evident in the ways the way that members of a sorority identify with each other and in the interactions between sororities and fraternities. Historically, in order to join a sorority an individual has had to identify as female, leaving no room for ambiguous genders. Furthermore, the members of a sorority address each other as sisters, leaving no room for same sex attraction and relationships.

Finally, a system that relies on the gender binary and heteronormativity to function doesn't only exclude the transgendered and LGBTQ community but also reinforces gender normative behavior. Sororities historically have consisted on heterosexual women or lesbians who were forced to stay closeted in order to protect the "idealized image". In a hierarchal system that dominated by men, in order to have any status and power women have had to look to men for approval and validation. This is demonstrated very clearly in Arthur's study. Members of the sororities AAA and BBB are hyper focused on their appearance because it is perceived that men value women's appearance more than any other characteristic. The most power these women can gain power by being the best object of desire for men; who are at the top of the gender hierarchy. Therefore, women compete with each other over the men's attention and women put themselves extreme measures to gain that status. Even though this provides individual women with power, it hurts the feminist movement by reducing women to objects of men's desires. Furthermore, it quite literally disempowers women by putting their physical and mental health at risk. In addition as an organizations these sororities construct and reinforce gender roles and unrealistic beauty standards.

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