

Introduction

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-In an apartment in India, two women commit suicide rather than allow their relationship with one another to be broken up by their families.

-In a house in Zimbabwe, a woman is raped repeatedly with the knowledge and consent of her family so that she will become pregnant, get married, and cease to have relationships with women.

-In a psychiatric institution in the United States, a teenage girl is subjected to coercive "treatment" to "cure" her of her lesbianism.

-In a courtroom in Germany, a woman loses custody of her child because the court finds that her lesbianism disqualifies her as a parent.

-In a prison in Uruguay, a woman is isolated in a cell because her captors know that she is a lesbian.

-In an office in the Philippines, two women are fired from their jobs at a human rights organization because they are in a relationship with one another.

Every day, all over the world, women face violence, harassment, and discrimination because they reject socially imposed gender roles and because they have intimate relationships with other women. The above examples, which are documented in the reports that follow, are drawn from different places and widely varying contexts. However, they all illustrate the coercion—emotional, physical, legal, and financial—that families, communities, religious institutions, and governments employ in violation of international human rights norms to enforce women’s adherence to heterosexuality. In addition, they are all human rights violations that are strikingly absent from the international human rights agenda.

For two years, women around the world worked to ensure that these incidents and other violations of lesbians’ human rights would be addressed when the Member States of the United Nations gathered in Beijing, China in September 1995 for the Fourth World Conference on Women. Activists presented declarations at regional preparatory meetings in Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe and North America.¹ Petitions calling on governments to “Put Sexuality on the Agenda at the World Conference on Women” were signed by thousands of women from over 60 countries, and by nearly 200 organizations around the world.² Many of the documents prepared for the conference by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) included lesbian rights in their recommendations and demands.³

At the conference itself, a lesbian caucus made up of activists from every region of the world lobbied government delegates to include language in the conference’s Platform for Action recognizing the existence of discrimination based on sexual orientation. The final hours of the conference witnessed a historic debate in which over thirty countries spoke in support of this language, including South Africa, Jamaica, Barbados, Canada, the United States, Cuba, Brazil, Slovenia, Latvia, Bolivia, Chile, the Cook Islands, Colombia,

Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, Norway, Israel and the members of the European Union. Their support was not great enough to overcome opposition from a conservative group of predominantly Muslim and Catholic countries, but it demonstrated that recognition of discrimination based on sexual orientation is growing around the world. A number of countries entered "interpretive statements" declaring that they understood particular sections of the document to apply to discrimination based on sexual orientation. In itself the debate served to raise awareness regarding the exclusion of lesbians from existing human rights guarantees, and laid the groundwork for future action at the local, national, and international level.

One question which lesbian activists encountered repeatedly in the preparations for Beijing was the following: "This is a conference for all women. Why is there a need to speak specifically about lesbians?" As many within the women's human rights movement have argued, women suffer human rights violations not simply on the basis of their gender but also on the basis of their race, nationality, political status, religion, ability, language, sexual orientation, age, and many other factors; no understanding of women's human rights can be complete without consideration of the multiple sources of women's oppression. These reports, compiled as part of the effort to raise awareness in Beijing, give numerous examples of the particular ways in which lesbians suffer human rights violations because of their sexual orientation. Further, these reports touch on issues that are relevant to women of all sexual orientations, such as the right of every woman to control her own body and to determine her own sexuality.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

This project builds on the important work that has been carried out within both the international lesbian and gay movement and the women's human rights movement in

recent years. By integrating questions of gender and sexual orientation into international human rights law, these two movements have laid the groundwork for addressing human rights violations against lesbians.

The International Lesbian and Gay Association, the International Lesbian Information Service, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission,⁴ and lesbian and gay groups in many countries around the world have demanded in recent years that human rights monitoring agencies begin to address the gross human rights abuses perpetrated against lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transsexuals, transvestites, and other sexual minorities. Cases that have garnered international attention include the murder of transvestites in Mexico, the imprisonment of gay men under sodomy laws in Romania, and the execution of lesbians and gay men in Iran.⁵

Activists have used letter-writing campaigns, legal challenges, and peaceful demonstrations to exert local and international pressure on offending governments and institutions and have won significant victories in many spheres. Anti-sodomy laws have been repealed in some jurisdictions, and men who have been imprisoned under such laws have been released. A groundbreaking 1994 decision by the United Nations Human Rights Committee found that a Tasmanian law prohibiting sodomy violated the right to equal protection and the right to privacy encompassed in the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).⁶ Legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation has been passed in New Zealand, Israel, and several European countries as well as parts of the United States, Canada, Australia, and Brazil. In 1994, South Africa became the first country to prohibit such discrimination in its constitution, and Poland is now considering a similar constitutional provision. A number of countries have begun to grant refugee status to those who fear persecution on the basis of their sexual orientation in their country of origin.⁷

While human rights organizations have been slow to recognize human rights violations based on sexual orientation

as part of their mission, several significant changes have recently taken place. In 1991, after 17 years of pressure from lesbian and gay activists, Amnesty International expanded its mandate to adopt as prisoners of conscience individuals who have been imprisoned solely because of their homosexuality.⁸ National human rights organizations in various countries, such as the Romanian Helsinki Committee and the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association, have spoken out on human rights violations based on sexual orientation and collaborated with local lesbian and gay activists.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

The recognition that persecution on the basis of sexual orientation is a violation of basic human rights is an essential first step to addressing human rights violations against lesbians. However, it is not in itself sufficient.

The women's human rights movement has demonstrated a number of different ways in which the dominant human rights discourse fails to address violations of women's human rights. First, the distinction between public and private and the almost exclusive focus on "the public" within mainstream human rights discourse have served to obscure many of the abuses perpetrated against women, particularly those that take place in the "private" sphere of home and family. Further, conventional notions of state accountability overlook the fact that most governments exhibit consistent patterns of failure to intervene in human rights abuses against women—for instance, in domestic violence; this systematic neglect by the state, coupled with the invocation of the sanctity of the family and the private sphere, serves to legitimate the abuse. Finally, human rights bodies can meaningfully address violations of women's human rights only if economic, social, and cultural rights are placed on par with civil and political rights.⁹

Like the broader human rights discourse within which it

emerged, the movement for the human rights of sexual minorities has emphasized civil and political rights rather than economic, social, and cultural rights. Likewise, the movement has focused primarily on acts committed by the state against individuals. Where the state has directly infringed upon the rights of lesbians, these violations have received international attention.¹⁰ However, the international community has remained silent when lesbians' economic, social, and cultural rights – such as the right to health care, housing, and education – are at stake, and when abuses are perpetrated by private individuals, particularly within the family. The human rights of lesbians cannot be meaningfully addressed until these violations are taken into consideration.

Laws directly prohibiting lesbianism do exist. For example, in the Bahamas, the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act of 1989 states that "Any female who has sexual intercourse with another female, whether with or without the consent of that female, is guilty of the offence of lesbianism and is liable to imprisonment for twenty years." However, of the over 50 countries in the world that currently prohibit same-sex sexual relations, few have enforced such laws against women. Whether in word or in practice, the majority of such laws have specifically targeted sex between men.¹¹

The relative absence of legal prohibitions against lesbianism has led some to believe that lesbians face less severe persecution than gay men. While such legislative silence may lead to a measure of safety, however, it is in itself an indication of other, more hidden, human rights violations. One of the primary reasons that lesbians have not been subject to state persecution is that they are socially invisible. In many places, lesbians are not able to establish communities or participate in public life, and the denial of lesbian existence by governments and society is one of the most profound harms that lesbians endure. As the reports that follow illustrate, these conditions allow society to take no responsibility for the lives of lesbians, and can serve to make politi-

cal action virtually impossible.

The insights of the women's human rights movement take on particular significance in considering human rights violations against lesbians. Not only do most violations of lesbians' human rights (like violations of women's rights more generally) take place within the "private" sphere, but the silence that surrounds lesbianism adds an additional layer of difficulty in documenting such violations. For example, the barriers that keep women from reporting domestic violence or rape—shame, fear, lack of appropriate services—are well known. Those barriers are even higher when reporting an incident requires that a woman admit to the police or other authorities that she is a lesbian. Whether or not explicit prohibitions against lesbianism exist in the law, women put themselves at great risk—jeopardizing family relationships, friendships, physical safety, employment, housing—if they publicly acknowledge that they are lesbians. In addition to the consequences that they may face, lesbians must also contend with the self-doubt and shame that widespread prejudice engenders. The rules may be unwritten—or even unspoken—but they are very real, and the official silence surrounding lesbianism does not make the prohibition of it any less powerful; it only makes it harder to document, respond to, or resist the abuses that lesbians experience.

LESBIAN RIGHTS, HUMAN RIGHTS

Given the difficulty of addressing human rights violations against women using conventional human rights frameworks, and the particular barriers that lesbians face in attempting to speak publicly about abuses they have suffered, it is not surprising that a central theme of many of the reports that follow is lesbian invisibility: invisibility within the law, within society, within the work of human rights organizations and women's organizations. These reports demonstrate the ways that this invisibility is produced and

maintained by means of economic and social inequality, physical violence, religious condemnation, psychological coercion, and other means. Many of the reports argue that this invisibility is in itself a human rights violation; that we must stop seeing silence as signifying an absence, but rather see it as signifying the presence of a multitude of barriers.

Taken together, these reports suggest ways in which our understanding of the following basic human rights must be transformed if we are to begin to address women's right to control their own bodies and determine their own sexuality:

Life, liberty, and security of person.¹² Several reports contain documentation of lesbians who have been murdered or physically harassed, such as Rita da Silva and her girlfriend Marly, two Brazilian lesbians who were beaten and killed by Marly's relatives in 1983. The Britain report notes a study that found that 31% of the lesbians questioned had experienced homophobic violence at least once in the last five years, mostly by unknown attackers in public places. Those who inflict violence on lesbians often do so with impunity; few governments specifically track hate crimes against sexual minorities, and the silence and shame surrounding lesbianism prevent lesbians from seeking help or speaking out against the violence they experience.

While much of the violence documented here is inflicted by others, self-injurious behavior affects lesbians in great numbers. Many of the reports included here mention the high suicide rates that exist among lesbians—in particular, young lesbians. Some of these are double suicides committed by lesbian couples who cannot face the separation that their families impose upon them, like Gita Darji and Kishori Shah, two women in their mid-twenties whose deaths are documented in the India report. The Thailand report discusses the suicide of a young woman whose family would not accept her relationship with another woman; the reaction of the villagers to her death—that she “deserved to

die"—demonstrates how such suicides can continue to occur. A 1989 United States government report found that lesbian and gay teenagers are two to three times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers, a result of the isolation and rejection that they encounter within a homophobic society.¹³ Suicides such as these are more than individual acts; they are the result of social attitudes and actions that can be altered through education and information. This loss of life is, in other words, preventable. Redefining such acts as human rights violations requires that we rethink notions of accountability and look at the complicity of governments in the conditions that lead to such deaths.

Freedom from Torture.¹⁴ Although the standard legal definition of torture requires that the role of the state be clearly identifiable, the women's human rights movement has shown that domestic violence is a form of torture—usually perpetrated by non-state agents but sanctioned by the state's unwillingness to intervene—and must be treated as such by human rights monitoring agencies. Many of the country reports that follow discuss the particular forms of abuse to which lesbians are subjected within their families. The extremes to which this abuse can be taken can be seen in the personal testimony of T.M. from Zimbabwe, who describes the process by which her family sought to keep her from living her life as a lesbian:

When they found out that I was a lesbian, they tried to force me to find a boyfriend but I could not fit in with what they wanted.... My parents decided to look for a husband on my behalf so they brought several boys home to meet me but I was not interested so in the end they forced an old man on me. They locked me in a room and brought him everyday to rape me so I would fall pregnant and be forced to marry him. They did this to me until I was pregnant after which they told me I was free to do whatever I wanted but that I must go and stay with this man or else they would throw me out of the house... Now I am always on the run. As soon as I know

my parents have found out where I am staying, I move on to another place. They are still after me. I have not seen my family in about seven months. I am scared this time they will put chains on me so I am in hiding.

Another form of torture to which young lesbians are subjected is psychiatric incarceration, which can involve shock therapy and medication with mind-altering drugs. Although homosexuality has been removed from the diagnostic manual approved by the World Health Organization and from similar documents in several countries, many manuals and medical textbooks continue to list homosexuality as a disease or abnormality. Julie Dorf and Gloria Careaga Pérez have suggested that in some countries, punitive psychiatry is used to persecute lesbians in the same way that imprisonment is used to persecute gay men.¹⁵ The Russia report documents several cases of young lesbians who have been committed to psychiatric institutions and treated with mind-altering drugs. Women who have undergone such "treatment" are forced to register with local authorities after their release; their status as mental patients bars them from any vocation that would put them in contact with people. In the United States, young lesbians can be committed to institutions under a variety of diagnoses, including "gender identity disorder." Governments become complicit in these acts when they allow doctors and institutions to confine lesbians and subject them to shock treatment and medication.

Freedom of expression and information.¹⁶ There are numerous examples documented here and elsewhere of governments violating lesbians' right to free expression through traditional means of state censorship. In Austria, Article 220 of the Criminal Code, which bans the promotion of homosexuality, has resulted in the seizure of lesbian and gay publications; in Zimbabwe, the Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories has been banned by the censors.

What many of these reports bring out are the less direct

but equally powerful ways in which lesbians are denied the ability to express themselves and denied vital and sometimes lifesaving information. As the report from Jordan states, "[W]e live our lives deprived of healthy and free chances, deprived of a forum in which we can express ourselves or shape any sort of understanding of ourselves as lesbians." Schools, youth groups, and other institutions deprive girls of information regarding sexuality in general, and alternatives to heterosexuality in particular. A lesbian quoted in the Romania report says that as a teenager she had no idea that other lesbians even existed. As the reports from India, South Africa, and many other countries make clear, the isolation that comes from this socially imposed silence can lead to drug and alcohol abuse, depression, and suicide. Thus the denial of the right to free expression often takes place long before the point of direct government repression. Through school curricula, social policies, and other means, governments foster conditions in which expressions of lesbian existence are dangerous or impossible.

Freedom of association.¹⁷ One way in which governments directly violate lesbians' right to freedom of association is by carrying out raids on lesbian bars, which are often the only spaces in which lesbians can gather. In a 1987 raid on a lesbian bar in Lima, Peru, police arrested approximately 70 women. The raid was staged in cooperation with a local television station, which caught the women on camera as they left the bar one by one and aired the footage on the national news. As a result, many women lost their jobs, and some were reported to have been beaten by their families. The women were forced to leave the police station after curfew and at least two were raped on their way home.¹⁸ The Argentina report contained here documents a more recent police raid of a lesbian bar in Buenos Aires.

As in the case of freedom of expression, we must look beyond these clear-cut examples of direct state action to

consider the wider socioeconomic and cultural forces that deny lesbians the right to freedom of association. Lesbian bars exist in many places, but report after report documents the ways in which lesbians lack access to public space. Several reports mention that while gay men gather in bars, parks, and other kinds of commercial and public spaces, lesbians remain isolated, and most lesbian socializing takes place in small groups in private homes. Like other women, lesbians lack the financial means and the freedom of movement to sustain commercial establishments. Many live with their families, and as unmarried women they are subject to the control of parents and other family members. As the report from Japan notes, a large number of lesbians are in heterosexual marriages, and are unable to maintain any contact with other lesbians. The restrictions imposed on women's freedom, combined with widespread homophobia, greatly impedes the ability of lesbians to associate with one another, whether for social purposes or to organize to demand their rights.

Equal protection and nondiscrimination.¹⁹ Despite the recent UN Human Rights Committee decision, laws criminalizing same-sex sexual relations continue to exist in countries around the world. The reports from Romania, Nicaragua, India, and elsewhere discuss the effects these laws can have on lesbians. Even in places without explicitly discriminatory legislation, broadly worded laws prohibiting acts against "public decency" or "public morality" are selectively enforced against sexual minorities. For instance, the Mexico report describes the case of two women who were cited under such a regulation for kissing one another in a car. Such laws have also been used to censor lesbian and gay publications and to prevent lesbian and gay marches and events.

Constitutional guarantees of equal protection and nondiscrimination are rarely interpreted to apply to sexual minorities, and lesbians who face discrimination in housing,

health care, or employment have no legal recourse outside of the handful of countries that have specifically outlawed discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The United States report notes the frequent failure of police to investigate cases of anti-lesbian violence, and the reluctance of judges to impose harsh sentences on the perpetrators of such crimes. As the Nicaragua report points out, "Those who are defined by law as criminals have little reason to believe that the justice system will protect them." The Uruguay and Colombia reports describe the discriminatory treatment that lesbians receive within prisons.

Although anti-discrimination laws represent promising new developments, many obstacles stand between such laws and their enforcement. The Brazil report notes that not a single legal challenge has been brought under Brazilian anti-discrimination laws, because few people are willing to publicly reveal their homosexuality. The Philippines report documents the case of Elizabeth Lim and Evangeline Castronuevo, two lesbians who were dismissed from their jobs at a human rights organization in the Philippines and are currently mounting the first lesbian legal challenge in Asia. What is unprecedented about their case is not that they were fired from their jobs because of their sexual orientation but that they dared to speak out about it. While our attention rightly focuses on important legal challenges such as this one, we must also consider the myriad other cases that never come to light and the economic, social, and cultural forces which keep women from challenging such discrimination.

The right to family.²⁰ Compulsory marriage is a theme brought out most strongly in the India report, but echoed in many others. As the Brazil report notes, without the ability to support themselves financially, many women are unable to determine their most basic life choices. Combined with the strong emphasis placed on heterosexual marriage in most societies, financial dependence means that few

women can choose to remain unmarried. While the right to family protects the right not to form a family, the Serbia report and others demonstrate that single women are subject to discrimination in many spheres of life and that the social pressure to marry remains extreme in many countries.

At the same time, lesbian partnerships are not recognized by law outside of a few countries. The Norway report shows that even countries that provide legal recognition of same-sex partnerships often deny such couples the right to adopt children. In Germany and several other countries, this discrimination can extend to policies barring lesbians from availing themselves of donor insemination services in order to give birth to children of their own. Even when such policies are not in place, many hospitals and individual doctors refuse such services to lesbian clients. Numerous reports document the frequency with which lesbian mothers are denied custody of their children. In all but a few countries, immigration laws which allow families to be reunited refuse to recognize same-sex partnerships.

The right to work.²¹ Employers, often with state approval, discriminate against lesbians (and in many cases, against all unmarried women) in all aspects of work-hiring, dismissal, promotion, training, and opportunities and conditions of the workplace. In most countries, the majority of lesbians remain "in the closet" (i.e., not revealing that they are lesbians) at their jobs, and with good reason. Reports from the Philippines and Argentina, among other countries, give examples of the consequences that women face on the job when they are known to be lesbians.

The right to health.²² As reports from Serbia, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico and elsewhere make clear, few lesbians feel able to reveal their sexual orientation to their health care providers, and few providers are trained to be sensitive to the needs of lesbians. Because of this, lesbians avoid seeking medical care, often waiting until problems become acute

and failing to obtain routine care. Those who lie about their sexual orientation are sometimes misdiagnosed. Those who do reveal that they are lesbians are often humiliated, mistreated, or told to seek psychiatric care. As is clear from the discussion of psychiatric incarceration, lesbians can expect little assistance from mental health professionals. Many avoid seeking care because they legitimately fear that psychiatrists and others will try to "treat" them for being lesbians rather than providing counseling for the real problems they may face.

The right to education.²³ As the Serbia report illustrates, girls who fail to conform to socially imposed gender roles or who openly identify themselves as lesbians are often denied access to education because of the discrimination they experience within educational institutions. Young lesbians are also subject to extreme forms of verbal and physical harassment from other students, and this harassment often goes unchecked by teachers and other authorities. The clearest example of this can be found in the Brazil report, which notes the case of a 19-year-old student barred from school "for her own safety" after other students threatened to physically assault her for having kissed her girlfriend.

The right to asylum and refugee status.²⁴ Although a number of countries have begun to grant refugee status to women and men fleeing persecution based on sexual orientation, many other countries have yet to grant a single lesbian or gay asylum claim.²⁵ For lesbians, the obstacles go beyond discriminatory policies; even in countries which have recognized such claims, the majority of those granted refugee status have been gay men. Lesbians, as women, often lack the freedom of movement and economic resources that would enable them to flee, and are thus less likely to leave home in the first place. If they do manage to escape, the abuses they have suffered (such as forced marriage) are often more difficult to document as persecution

than are anti-sodomy laws and other forms of direct state persecution.

This list, while by no means exhaustive, provides an indication of the breadth of human rights violations that lesbians experience. Without recognition of these abuses, the human rights movement cannot begin to address the full range of gender-based persecution, nor the full range of violations based on sexual orientation.

METHODOLOGY

This project was initiated and coordinated by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) in partnership with regional coordinators in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America. These regional coordinators located authors from each of the countries represented here; in all, activists and researchers from approximately 60 different countries were approached, of whom about half were ultimately able to submit reports.

Each author received guidelines from IGLHRC (revised, in one region, by the regional coordinators) which suggested a set of issues that the reports might wish to address, including discriminatory laws, child custody, lesbian organizing, and anti-lesbian violence. Authors were encouraged to write about whatever issues were most important in their country. Each report was read by several advisors; IGLHRC staff and volunteers helped to supplement and verify the information that the authors provided.

Certain aspects of these reports represent notable advancements over prior reporting on lesbian human rights. With the exception of the India report, all were written by people who were raised in the countries in question, and all of the reports were written by people who currently reside

in those countries. These factors, while significant, should not distract from consideration of the fact that this volume does not in any way constitute a definitive global survey. Among the countries that are not represented are some where lesbian organizing is well established, as well as many others (most notably from Africa and the Middle East) where lesbian organizations do not exist. The selection of countries represented here should not be taken as an indication of the countries that are the "worst" for lesbians or the "best." The kinds of issues that lesbians face vary significantly, but there is no country in the world in which women are entirely free to determine how and with whom they live their lives.

While this volume as a whole is not a definitive statement about the conditions of lesbians globally, neither are the individual country reports definitive statements about lesbians in the particular countries in question. A few authors preface their reports by stating that the scope of their analysis is limited by race, class, geography, and other factors. This qualification should be kept in mind in reading all of the reports contained here. Some focus on the legal situation, some on the media, some on historical background; this variation has as much to do with the authors as it does with the conditions in a particular country.

This book would not have been possible without the work that has gone before it. Many individuals and organizations are currently engaged in researching various issues relating to lesbians, and in the years to come this volume will likely be joined by others that will greatly increase our understanding.

For some countries, however, these reports represent a first attempt to describe the conditions under which lesbians live. Several authors make reference to the almost complete lack of documentation on human rights violations against lesbians, and the need for further research. In an early draft of the Uruguay report, the author explained, "We are not resigned to this situation: quite the contrary! The

preparation of this report brought me into contact with many lesbians who expressed great hopes that something might come out of it. Since this is the first such report, we decided to present actual cases without naming the individuals involved. Something which was said to me again and again while compiling this report was: do not break the contact begun here."

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

These reports were written in response to the invisibility of lesbians in most existing human rights reporting, and for this reason they primarily discuss human rights violations based on sexual orientation. This approach has the benefit of focusing attention on issues too often silenced in other fora. However, it has also forced authors to forego more detailed discussions of the broader contexts which inform their reports.

There are undoubtedly women in every part of the world who have intimate and sexual relationships with women. To use the term lesbian to describe them, however, is grossly inadequate. At best, it serves as highly imperfect shorthand for a range of identities and practices too varied to sum up in any word or set of words. At worst, the exclusive use

of this term runs the risk of suggesting that diverse histories and contexts can be understood through a single set of assumptions.

As the Hong Kong report notes, the idea that sexual acts create sexual identities is not universal. The construction of sexuality varies not only among but also within regions, countries, and communities. In India, some women choose to organize politically as single women, and others as lesbians. In Hong Kong, the group Queer Sisters is seeking to redefine lesbian issues to include all women who challenge dominant constructions of gender or sexuality. These vital discussions are taking place in many different places around

the world.

The use of the term lesbian here reflects the chosen terminology of most of the country reports and of the documents that have come out of several different regions in preparation for the World Conference on Women. The reports that follow, written by women from a diverse range of locations—both geographic and theoretical—do not utilize one definition of their subject matter. Some authors focus on issues affecting gay men as well as lesbians, and some have explicitly included bisexual women in their discussions. Others discuss human rights violations against transsexuals. Several note that laws used against lesbians are the same laws used against sex workers. The Serbia report uses the terminology “lesbians, single women, and women not attached to men” to emphasize that the problems lesbians face sometimes spring less from their relationships with women than from the absence of a male partner.

Even the reports which use only the term lesbian demonstrate the impossibility of confining the subject matter within the neat lines that such a term suggests. For instance, compulsory marriage, while it is sometimes used by parents specifically to put an end to lesbian relationships, is also imposed on many girls and women regardless of sexual orientation, and the policing of same-sex relationships cannot be seen in isolation from the policing of relationships which cross lines of race, class, or religion. More than anything else, these reports discuss the control that societies and governments seek to exert over women’s sexuality.

CREATING A BROAD SEXUAL RIGHTS AGENDA

While these reports speak of human rights abuses, they are also testament to the lesbian organizing that is flourishing in many parts of the world despite political, economic, and psychological obstacles. Lesbian activists have organized groups, newsletters, events, hotlines, and many other services and programs. Three Asian Lesbian Network confer-

ences have taken place since 1990. Latin American and Caribbean lesbians have been holding regional conferences since 1986. The annual conferences of the International Lesbian and Gay Association and the conferences of the International Lesbian Information Service have brought activists in contact with one another and fostered international networking.

The courageous and groundbreaking work of lesbian activists, however, has yet to be recognized by many women's organizations and human rights organizations. At the World Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), sexual rights emerged as a central focus of the NGO agenda, and important gains in the realm of sexual rights were made in Beijing: in its final form, the Platform for Action recognizes that "The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence." As in other areas of feminist struggle, however, the movement for sexual rights often leaves "controversial" issues such as sexual orientation and gender identity at the margins.

The reports contained here present stark evidence of the need for a broad sexual rights movement that addresses the human rights of all women—including lesbians, bisexual women, transgendered women, and other sexual minorities. Unless human rights organizations and women's organizations recognize these issues as their own, they will continue to be complicit in the silence that enables human rights violations against lesbians and other sexual minorities to occur.

NOTES

- 1 The text of these declarations appear as Appendices B-E.
- 2 The text of the petition and a list of organizational endorsements appears as Appendix A.
- 3 As a result of NGO recommendations and proposals by govern-