

Japan



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LESBIAN ACTIVISM

The lesbian movement in Japan grew out of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s. In 1971, the first lesbian social group, Fresh Green Club, was formed. Subarashii Onnatachi (Wonderful Women), the first lesbian feminist magazine in Japan, began publication in 1976, and the establishment of many small groups and newsletters followed in its wake.

In 1985, the first lesbian overnight gathering took place near Tokyo and was attended by 60 Japanese and foreign lesbians. Later, these informal conferences came to be known as weekends, and since then weekends have been held three or four times a year, and approximately 100 women generally attend. They provide a rare opportunity for lesbians to discuss their concerns, participate in sports programs, and interact with other lesbians living in Japan. How-

ever, the lesbophobia in Japan is such that it is impossible for the group that organizes these gatherings to use its real name when renting space.

A major turning point for the lesbian movement came in 1987 with the release by a mainstream publisher of a book titled *Onna O Aisuru Onnatachi No Monogatari* (Story of Women Who Love Women). The book included personal life stories of lesbians in Japan and other countries, as well as information regarding existing organizations and bars, and its publication expanded the lesbian liberation movement in Japan considerably.

In the same year, a group of lesbians set up the first lesbian activist organization in Japan, Regumi Studio Tokyo, under the auspices of JOKI, a cooperative office for feminist groups. Regumi Studio established a monthly newsletter (Regumi Tsushin), a library of lesbian literature, support and discussion groups, and a telephone information and referral line. This helped to support isolated lesbians living in various parts of the country. The organization played an important role in extending the network of lesbians living in Japan by organizing overnight gatherings in various places in Japan and motivating rural lesbians to start newsletters and groups of their own.

In 1986, during the Eighth International Lesbian Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, lesbians from Thailand, India, Bangladesh, the United States, and Japan formed the Asian Lesbian Network (ALN). In 1990, the first ALN conference was held in Thailand. The second ALN Conference was held in Japan in May 1992 and was attended by approximately 170 lesbians. The conference contributed to the growth of the Japanese lesbian movement.

For the most part, the publications and activities of lesbian groups have taken place within the feminist movement. However, in 1992, LABRYS, a magazine that serves lesbians who are not part of the feminist movement, began publication. It includes features, reviews, and letters, and has become very popular among many lesbians in their teens

and twenties, as well as among bisexuals and transsexuals. The magazine provides a forwarding service for readers' letters, encouraging more communication among lesbians in Japan. Its readership has grown to 1,600 women, and it has significantly changed the lesbian community, adding to dialogue between women and fostering positive images of lesbians.

The lesbian movement gained new energy after the first Lesbian and Gay Parade was held in Tokyo in August 1994. More than 1,200 lesbians, gay men, and their friends joined the parade and walked from Shinjuku to Shibuya (two major shopping and entertainment areas) singing and dancing all the way. More than 80 reporters also attended, and many lesbians and gay men living in rural areas were encouraged by watching TV reports of the parade. Kokusai Bian Renmei (International Lesbians United), a group formed to take part in the parade, continued to plan activities afterwards, and is now the most active lesbian group in Japan. Most of the group's work has focused on increasing lesbian visibility in mainstream Japanese society. Its members monitor and respond to representations of lesbians in the media, organize cultural events, and perform street theater to call attention to important issues. In one such action, a group of women sang about dental dams¹ in front of a popular sex toy shop in Harajuku to bring attention to the fact that people still cannot purchase dental dams in Japan. During the event the women kissed each other in the street to show heterosexual bystanders that they are proud to be lesbians.

DISCRIMINATION

Japanese lesbians experience discrimination not only on the basis of their sexual orientation but also on the basis of their gender. The social and economic disparity between men and women that characterizes Japanese society as a whole can be seen as well within the lesbian and gay community. For example, in the biggest gay neighborhood in

Tokyo, Shinjuku 2-chome, there are said to be 200 to 300 gay men's bars, discos, and shops, while there are fewer than 10 bars for lesbians. The lack of commercial establishments aimed at lesbians is not an indication that the lesbian population in Japan is small, but rather that lesbians do not have nearly as much disposable income. In general, women hold lower paying jobs than men and receive lower wages than men for the same work. In addition, lesbians, like all women, have much less freedom to socialize, particularly at night. Many unmarried women live with their parents, which greatly restricts their mobility. Furthermore, there is great pressure to marry in Japan (see below) and a significant number of lesbians are completely hidden about their sexu-

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ality and are married to men. While married men generally have considerable freedom to socialize in gay meeting places, married women can almost never consider such a thing.

Another example reflecting the social and economic disparity between gay men and lesbians is the difference in the circulation of lesbian and gay magazines. While there are currently at least five gay men's magazines in publication, ranging from pornography to political commentary, mass-market magazines about lesbians are limited to pornography geared toward heterosexual men. Magazines published by

lesbians are not sold at general bookstores and circulate only through small existing networks. This disparity again reflects the fact that gay men have greater access to the resources necessary to launch such publications, as well as customers with more buying power.

MARRIAGE

Japanese society attaches great importance to marriage, and those who remain unmarried have to contend with considerable social stigma. For anyone—male or female, homo- or heterosexual—remaining single can be an obstacle to promotions at work and to recognition by family and by society. For lesbians, however, refusing to marry can have drastic consequences, particularly for those living in small towns where women face greater discrimination in employment and can hardly find jobs to support themselves. Women often have no other choice than to marry. One lesbian from Kyushu, in the southwestern part of Japan, lamented at a recent lesbian gathering that in her home town women who remained single after 30 years of age would be labeled as "katawa" or deformed. (The term "katawa" is a derogatory term referring to a disabled person, and its use has been banned in the Japanese media.)

EMPLOYMENT

Discrimination based on sex is prohibited by Article 14 of the Constitution. However, discrimination against women in the workplace is widespread, with few women attaining high-paying or powerful positions in any sector of the economy. Women are expected to conform to traditional gender roles within the workplace. For instance, although by law employees are guaranteed a total of 60 minutes a day for caring for infants under one year of age, this has until very recently applied only to women, reflecting the widespread assumption that raising children is women's work. In the

workplace, being public about one's lesbianism or failing to conform to traditional female gender roles can lead to harassment and discrimination.

DISCRIMINATORY GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Many government policies relating to taxation and social benefits discriminate on the basis of marital status. Married women are exempt from taxes if their income is below one million yen (approximately 10,000 U.S. dollars). Further, they do not have to pay for health insurance or pensions, for they are considered to be dependents of their husbands. Official marriage registration forms have spaces in which names of the husband and wife are written, but they do not specify the sex of the "husband" or "wife." However, same-sex partnerships are not legally recognized in any way under Japanese law, and lesbians are not entitled to any benefits that their partners may receive through their employment, such as health insurance and pensions.

LESBIAN IMAGES IN THE MEDIA

In Japan, lesbians are often referred to by the pejorative term "lez," meaning "women who have sex with women" or "women who want to be men." Lesbian-themed pornography made by and for heterosexual men has had a great influence on popular perceptions of lesbians, and the mainstream media rarely seeks to counter these stereotypes with articles or reports showing the diversity and complexity of lesbian life.

For example, in 1981, a weekly magazine called *Shukan Bunshun* published a report about a lesbian social group, Fresh Green Club, which was celebrating its 10th anniversary. The report was accompanied by a pornographic photo that had nothing to do with the group, and the caption made fun of them with a pun referring to the three divine symbols of the Japanese Imperial throne, "three sacred

treasures for them are fingers, tongue and lips." Another weekly magazine called *Shukan Sankel* reported in 1977 that a homicide occurred within a lesbian relationship. The article appeared in a series titled "Porno Memorandum of Daily Incidents," and reported a love relationship between two women with the sensational headline "Lez Pleasure: An Ordinary Wife Risked her Life." In another incident, a lesbian popular singer lost her career after her sexuality was disclosed by her enraged ex-lover in 1980 and widely covered in a sensational way in the media.

In the last five years, the media has begun to treat lesbians and gay men as a fashionable subject, and television and magazine coverage has been increasing. However, the approach of the media is still voyeuristic. One journalist went incognito into the lesbian community in Tokyo in order to write an expose of *Alis*, a disco which she expected to be a promiscuous sex party. The truth was just the opposite: *Alis* was a grass-roots disco organized by a few lesbians. In order to research the article the reporter went into the disco, pretended to be a lesbian, and published the article without getting permission from anyone she spoke to or giving any notice beforehand.² Lesbian characters are also beginning to appear in television shows but they are generally portrayed as tragic characters who try to seduce pretty women and fail.

In May 1995, under the slogan "Hetero exploitation no more!! We are the people who tell the truth!!" several lesbian and bisexual journalists began to publish *Phryne*, a magazine for women-loving women. The magazine, which contains comics, fiction, interviews, and feature stories, is available at regular bookstores.

After years of building small communities in which to interact with one another, Japanese lesbians are beginning to make their voices heard. Through publications such as *Phryne* and actions of the sort that *Kokusai Bian Renmei* has begun to organize, lesbians are beginning to challenge the pervasive stereotypes that both promote discrimination

against lesbians and reinforce the isolation and self-doubt that many lesbians experience.

NOTES

- 1 Dental dams are latex barriers that prevent the transmission of HIV during oral sex.
- 2 "Lez Party Sneak-In Report," Josei Seven, November 1993.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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