

Poland



Joanna Garnier

Very little research has been conducted on lesbians in Poland. Studies of homosexuality have primarily focused on gay men, while research concerning women has not taken into consideration the issue of sexual orientation. This report is based upon information obtained from informal interviews with lesbians in Warsaw. It also makes use of the results of a report entitled *Lesbians and the Church*, written by Marzena Stana and published in Berlin in 1993.

THE LAW

Polish legislation on homosexuality is rather liberal. The legal age of consent for sexual contact is 15, and this law applies equally to heterosexual and homosexual couples. Same-sex sexual relations are not and have never been outlawed in Poland. While Polish law currently contains no prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation,

this may soon change. In April, 1995, the Constitutional Committee, which is in the process of drafting Poland's new constitution, proposed the following language for Paragraph 2, Article 22 :

Nobody can be discriminated against because of their sex, race, national or ethnic background, health, physical or mental disability, social background, place of birth, sexual orientation, language spoken, religious faith or lack thereof, opinions, material status or for any other reason.

At this time, debate is continuing and there is significant opposition to the inclusion of sexual orientation in this paragraph. The opposition is particularly strong from the church, which has unanimously criticized the proposed clause. Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek has called it "an example leading toward extremes which cannot be accepted by any normal society."¹

DISCRIMINATION

As Bishop Pieronek's words illustrate, the liberal tendency of Polish law is not necessarily reflected in social attitudes, and for lesbians, prejudices regarding homosexuality are compounded by the discrimination that they suffer as women. Legally, women are guaranteed the same rights as men. However, in practice women have more difficulty finding work, earn less, and receive fewer promotions.

Very few lesbians are open about their sexual orientation in the workplace for fear of being fired or harassed. This is particularly true of lesbians working as teachers in schools or in other professions that bring them into contact with children; the belief that lesbians and gay men should not be involved in raising children and young people is widespread in Poland.

The art of camouflage has been perfected by lesbians living in villages and small towns. Fearing discrimination and

ostracism, such women rarely decide to "come out of the closet" about their lesbianism. If they are able to, many flee to large cities, such as Warsaw, Cracow, or Gdansk, where it is easier for them to conceal their sexuality and maintain anonymity. People in large towns and cities are more likely to accept differences of all types than are residents of villages or small towns.

MARRIAGE

The assumption of heterosexuality is so strong in Polish society that in certain ways it protects lesbians from

Many young lesbians decide to get married because of pressure from their families or out of the desire to be accepted and to lead a "normal life."

scrutiny: women who live together, hold hands, or demonstrate affection for one another do not necessarily meet with any suspicion, and single women are not automatically assumed to be lesbians. While this can create some room for lesbian relationships to exist without persecution, the centrality of heterosexual marriage in Polish society also has negative consequences for lesbians. Marriage adds considerably to a woman's status, and women who are not married are often treated with contempt. According to Marzena Stana's study on lesbians and the church, many Polish lesbians are in fact married to men. Many young lesbians

decide to get married because of pressure from their families or out of the desire to be accepted and to lead a "normal life." Many get married before they are even conscious of their sexual orientation, and others believe that they will get over their lesbianism after they get married. The patriarchal model is so pervasive in Poland that many young lesbians accept the idea that their fundamental task in life is to get married and have children. They may discover their lesbianism years later and then find themselves unable to leave their husbands for financial or other reasons. Some lesbians enter into marriages with gay men in order to pacify their families.

ADOPTION AND DONOR INSEMINATION

Heterosexual married couples and single people are permitted to adopt children in Poland. Lesbians are not allowed to adopt children as a couple, and an individual lesbian would not be able to adopt if her sexual orientation were known. Donor insemination is available only to married couples. By and large the Polish public believes that lesbians and gay men should not raise children, even their own.

CHURCH

Poles are raised in a society which has been shaped by Christianity for centuries and in which the Catholic Church has a great deal of influence on the political life of the country. As is the case elsewhere, the Catholic Church in Poland condemns homosexuality as a sin. Lesbians who look for help and support from the church and the clergy often meet with rejection. Many lesbians report feeling discriminated against or even psychologically harassed by their confessors. Lesbians who discuss their sexual orientation are frequently told that lesbian sexual behavior is a sin and a devia-

tion. They are told that they should change themselves, get married, have children, and devote themselves to their family. As a consequence of this type of attitude on the part of the church many lesbians give up their religious practices or leave the Catholic Church in search of more tolerant faiths. However, they cannot completely escape the church's teachings because the Catholic Church is the moral authority for the majority of Polish society, and its role in shaping people's attitudes is extensive.

THE LESBIAN MOVEMENT

In Poland, the lesbian movement is integrally tied to the gay male movement. Lambda, a national group, and the Warsaw-based Ruch Lesbijek Gajow (Lesbian and Gay Movement) both have male and female members. Men, however, are in the majority in both organizations. Lesbians are very reluctant to become active in any organizations, partly because like all Polish women they are socialized from a very early age into passive social roles. This contributes to the lack of visibility of lesbians in Poland.

Two lesbian publications have appeared but neither is currently active. Aside from these periodicals there have been only two publications addressed to lesbians: one, a photocopied leaflet on safe sex and the other, a photocopied selection of lesbian poetry. There are several gay male publications, but they include little material written by or for lesbians.

While the state of lesbian organizing leaves much to be desired, things do seem to be improving. In Warsaw, more lesbians are becoming active in Ruch Lesbijek Gajow. Activists are currently planning to establish a crisis telephone line for lesbians and are preparing another pamphlet on safe sex for lesbians. However, these efforts are hampered by a lack of resources; without an office or meeting place, and with few people willing to sponsor "deviants," lesbian organizing continues to grow at a very slow pace.

NOTES

- 1 Piotr Dukaczewski and Grzegorz Witkowski, "Homosexual Rights Provision – Love's Close-Call Clause," Warsaw Voice, 24 April 1995.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joanna Garnier, 30, is a librarian, mother of little Justyna, and a member of Ruch Lesbijek Gajow, a new organization for gay people in Poland. The organization is especially interested in human rights and issues around "coming out."