

Serbia



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Being a lesbian in Serbia means that you don't exist at all. You don't exist legally; you don't exist illegally. You are an offensive word, a bad character from a cheap novel or a character from a pornographic film. But being a woman who loves other women, or any woman without a man to stand behind, means that you live in fear.

Women in Serbia are validated by their husbands. If a lesbian chooses the way of living she desires, it means that she's condemning herself to the endless battle for her integrity. No one imagines that a woman living without a man could be part of a couple. Lesbians aren't even lesbians here—they are single women, and as single women they encounter many forms of discrimination. A single woman will be the second choice for a job offer if there is a married woman who applies for the same position. Married women are seen as those who have learned to obey and respect authority. It's thought, why take a chance on a single woman? A single woman will have a difficult time finding a

decent apartment for herself; landlords will be suspicious of her morality. A single woman will get fired from her job if there is a need for reducing the staff; she eats less. A single woman will be put on graveyard shift all of the time; she doesn't have any family obligations. A single woman should be at home before dark; there is nobody to protect her from being harassed or raped on the street; if she encounters any kind of violence, she asked for it by being on the street alone. A single woman is never thought to be single because she decided to be that way. She is always seen as abandoned, unable to find a man, immoral, crazy, or unable to have children. Two women living together may not be seen as lesbians, but they will nevertheless be the object of their neighbors' suspicions. People prefer "normal" families with children and a male head of the family. Who could imagine women having a family together?

THE STATUS OF THE LAW

The Yugoslav Constitution does not mention the existence of lesbians in any way, positive or negative. On July 14, 1994, the Serbian government adopted a new criminal law lifting the ban on male homosexuality. However, the age of consent for male homosexuals remains higher (age 18) than that for heterosexuals (age 14). Lesbianism was not included in the original legislation, and lesbians are not covered by the current age of consent law.¹

The reform came as a surprise to the Serbian gay and lesbian community. Many assume that the change came from someone high up in government. In the current political climate, there is little opportunity for ordinary citizens to influence legislation in Serbia. This is particularly the case for lesbian and gay activists, for whom lobbying means calling attention to themselves publicly as members of an "undesirable" group. Given the war and the current state of lawlessness in Serbia, this could provoke a dangerous reaction from the government or its agents. In general, those who demand their rights are seen as threat to nationalist ideals, and

diversity among women is particularly seen as an affront to the nation. There is presently a strong campaign against abortion backed by an explicitly nationalist and pro-natalist ideology, and lesbians, who do not fit into the image of "mothers of the nation," are viewed as useless elements of society.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LESBIANS

In October 1994, Arkadija's Lesbian Working Group conducted a street survey in Belgrade on attitudes toward lesbians. Fifty people were asked the following questions:

1. Do you know what a lesbian is?
2. Do you know any lesbians?
3. Would you allow your daughter/wife to have a lesbian friend?
4. Would you mind if you discovered that one of your colleagues is a lesbian?
5. Would you still go to the same store if you knew that the shopkeeper was a lesbian?
6. Would you allow your child to have a lesbian teacher?
7. Do you think that lesbianism is 1) hereditary, 2) acquired, 3) illness, 0) none of the above?
8. What would you do with such a person?

Responses

| | Younger Women (avg. age, 23) | Older Women (avg. age, 45) | Younger Men (avg. age, 22) | Older Men (avg. age, 54) |
|---------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Yes - 100% | Yes - 100% | Yes - 100% | Yes - 100% | Yes - 100% |
| 2. Yes - 22% | Yes - 20% | Yes - 28% | Yes - 25% | No - 75% |
| No - 72% | No - 80% | No - 72% | No - 75% | |
| 3. Yes - 44% | 100% - No | Yes (wife) - 57% | Yes | |
| (wife) - 75% | | No - 43% | No - 25% | |
| No - 56% | | | | |
| 4. Yes - 57% | Yes - 70% | No - 100% | Yes - 25% | |
| No - 43% | No - 30% | | No - 75% | |

174 UNSPOKEN RULES

| | | | |
|----------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|
| 5. Yes - 100% | Yes - 80% | Yes - 100% | Yes - 75% |
| | No - 20% | | No - 25% |
| 6. Yes - 44% | Yes - 20% | Yes - 72% | Yes - 75% |
| No - 56% | No - 80% | No - 28% | No - 25% |
| 7. (2) 44% | (2) 20% | (1) 14% | (2) 100% |
| (3) 56% | (3) 80% | (2) 14% | |
| | | (3) 49% | |
| | | (0) 23% | |
| 8. 35% Nothing | | 20% Nothing | 61% Nothing |
| 25% Nothing | | | |
| 31% Medical | | 60% Medical | 39% Sex |
| 75% Sex | | | |
| Treatment | | Treatment | |
| 11% Isolation | | 10% Isolation | |
| 23% Friends | 10% Aggressive | | |
| | Treatment | | |

According to the survey results, women are more homophobic than men, but it is obvious that most men have a voyeuristic attitude. They would allow their wives to have a lesbian friend, but not their daughters, and most of older men who were questioned would "treat" lesbians sexually in order to "cure" them. It is obvious that a large majority of the population believes that lesbianism is an illness and that it should be medically treated. Some of the women respondents suggested isolating lesbians in ghettos; some even suggested sewing up the genitals of lesbians. While less homophobic than the older generation, the younger respondents still exhibited many prejudices against lesbians, saying that lesbians are sick and need to be cured.

CHILD CUSTODY

As previously mentioned, there are no laws that explicitly criminalize lesbianism. However, in the homophobic atmosphere in which we are living, it is impossible to even hope that anybody would try to understand a lesbian mother who

claims her right to obtain custody of her child. Lesbians are considered to be immoral, irresponsible, mentally disturbed, and dangerous. Women are forced to hide their lesbianism in order to retain custody of their children; accusations of lesbianism (whether true or not) can be used as a reason to take a child away. Many lesbians in Serbia have children, but they live as quietly as possible, often sacrificing themselves for their children.

"We had to sue him for libel because if he proved that J. and I had a lesbian relationship, the Court would not permit J. to see her child at all" a forty-year-old lesbian, B., commented on her girlfriend's process of divorcing. "Her husband wanted to keep J. away from their daughter, but fortunately we had a good lawyer. M. [the daughter] is living with her father now in the other town, but she is coming to visit us for holidays. I love her as if she is my own child, and I miss her a lot

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can have disastrous
effects.

every time she goes back to her father."²

An issue which compounds this problem is that divorced women often live with their parents. In constant fear of being discovered, lesbian mothers are in a "double closet"—hiding their sexuality from the state but also from their parents, children, colleagues, and friends.

EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION

"If there was a homosexual in this office, I would fire this person immediately," stated the director of a large legal research firm in Belgrade. "How do you know that there is not such a person in here?" one of the employees remarked. "I have heard something about that, but I don't know it for sure. If I was positive, I would expel them from the job," the director continued. "But there is no legal basis for something like that; what would be your excuse for firing that person?" frightened Z. asked her superior. "I would just make sure that I found something and make that person withdraw their documents on their own and leave the firm," he declared.³

Z. has been living in fear of being exposed to her supervisor for three years. She is afraid that any of her colleagues might see her walking with her girlfriend and suspect something. She knows that she could lose her position and her future if somebody finds out that she is a lesbian.

Discrimination against lesbians is particularly strong in professions that involve work with children. At an April 1994 meeting of one of the humanitarian foundations in Belgrade, a group of Belgrade University psychology professors suggested that L.M., a lesbian psychologist at the Center for Women and Children Victims of Violence, should be barred from working with young victims of rape and domestic violence because of her sexuality. These professors eventually managed to have Arkadija, a lesbian and gay organization, prohibited from holding meetings at the Women's Studies Center because the group was "incompatible" with the refugee project on which they were working. "It is ironic," they said, "that we must share a space with perverts when people who really need help come here." (The true irony of this statement is that some of Arkadija's members are themselves refugees.)⁴

Even a single allegation of lesbianism can have disastrous effects:

G. was a successful musician in a local cafe. She always attracted a big crowd and her boss was always happy with her. Then one day, in the middle of her act, a drunk man stood up and shouted "lesbian" at her. He continued to verbally abuse her and threatened physical violence. The next day, the owner of the cafe told G. that she was fired.⁵

These are just three examples of the kind of harassment lesbians have on the job. No laws protect lesbians from being fired or discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientation. With few exceptions, lesbians must hide all aspects of their lives that might reveal their sexual orientation at their place of employment.

STREET HARASSMENT

In Serbia, lesbians are utterly invisible. Boys and men use the word "lesbian," but they use it as one insult among many to harass women as women and not necessarily as lesbians. Street harassment and other forms of violence against women, both on the streets and at home, have increased since the start of the war. Some of the women who experience this violence are lesbians but again, they are invisible.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

The examples of social isolation are too numerous to list. Being a single woman in Serbia means being marked because you don't fit into the pattern of "the mother of the nation." Under very hard conditions, marked by a complete breakdown in the legal system, virulent nationalism and pro-fascistic propaganda, those whose "devotion to the fatherland" is questioned have few chances of advancing in any realm of life.

EDUCATION

The stigma attached to homosexuality can make it difficult for young lesbians to obtain an education. Those whose sexuality becomes known often face discrimination in school.

A 17 year old high school student , S., fell in love with one of her female professors. She sent the professor a letter of admiration and some flowers. When the professor found out who sent the love note, she made a remark about it at a board meeting. Soon everybody in the school knew about S., and S. was ultimately forced to leave the school. She was unable to attend classes without being constantly insulted by her schoolmates and mistreated by her professors.⁶

DISCRIMINATION WITHIN THE FAMILY

Due to the poor economic situation in the country, single people are often forced to share the same space with their parents. This is especially true for women because they cannot afford to move out and become independent of their families. Very few lesbians live alone or in couples. Their incomes are usually not high enough to cover the basic costs of living, and they are thus dependent on the good will of their parents. In such situations, families often feel that they have the right to regulate the private life of their members. It is not uncommon for a lesbian to be blackmailed with the threat that her sexual orientation will be revealed to her family. In cases where their secret is somehow revealed, many lesbians immediately lose the financial and emotional support of their family.

Lesbians are seen as a disgrace and an affront to the family's honor. One of the lawyers of the Belgrade Women's Law Group recently received a phone call from a woman seeking advice. Her "problem" was that she had a neighbor with a lesbian granddaughter. According to her complaint,

the young woman was mistreating her grandmother by bringing her lesbian partner home. Except for that, the "concerned" neighbor had no other facts to prove that the "unfortunate grandmother" had been mistreated in any other way.⁷

HEALTH CARE

When J.T. reached her late forties, she visited a gynecologist for menstrual problems she was experiencing. She had seen a gynecologist only once before, when she was 20. At the second examination, she was subject to harassment and humiliation by the doctor when he discovered that her hymen was intact. "Why didn't you pay somebody to sleep with you?" he screamed at her after performing the exam.⁸

Many lesbians do not visit gynecologists because medical practitioners assume that all women are sexually active with men, and lesbians are often forced to lie or risk the consequences of revealing their lesbianism. Many lesbians not only forego preventative care; they also delay treatment for medical conditions until they become acute.

Medical professionals are not educated to be sensitive to the needs and concerns of lesbian patients. On the contrary, homosexuality is discussed in the medical textbooks as a disease.⁹ Although lesbian and gay activists have begun talking to women's groups about calling for the demedicalization of homosexuality, no other groups have yet taken on the campaign.

ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE

Arkadija, the only lesbian and gay organization in Serbia, has existed since 1990. The decriminalization of male homosexuality in 1994 has enabled Arkadija to become for the

first time somewhat open in its work. Arkadija's Lesbian Working Group is holding workshops once a week with the primary goal of the increasing self-awareness, self-respect, and self-confidence of the women who attend. There are more and more women interested in gathering and sharing opinions and experiences. For some women, these meetings are the first time that they have been able to express their lesbianism openly to anyone. Last fall, the Working Group held a safe-sex workshop for lesbians; never before had lesbians gathered to discuss HIV among lesbians. Still, there is very little information on HIV and AIDS, and little on lesbian health care in general.

Arkadija has also begun to explore the possibilities of publicizing the group through the media. In the summer of 1994, an "out" lesbian appeared on television for the first time in Serbian history. This show received several positive responses from the public and it was carried by the regular Belgrade Art Channel. Arkadija has also encountered some success in the print media. The daily Borba ran several positive articles about lesbians in late 1994 and early 1995, three of which were written by Arkadija members. However, Borba was one of the last remaining independent papers and has recently been banned by the government.

In addition to building links with lesbian and gay organizations in other countries, Arkadija is also reaching out to women at home through a bimonthly bulletin. Arkadija views the struggle for the human rights of lesbians and gay men as one part of a much larger struggle to increase tolerance within Serbian society for minorities of all sorts.

NOTES

- 1 Article 10 of the Criminal Law of the Republic of Serbia, 14 July 1994, Section on Indecent Acts Against Nature, reads: "For indecent acts against nature with the under-aged male person over the age of 14, the actor will be punished by the imprisonment of up to one year." The former version crimi-