

Thailand



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Thai law does not state anything regarding lesbians. In fact, there is no specific term in Thai for lesbianism. The closest equivalent is len-peuhn or "playing with friends." The verb len does not indicate playing as an innocent preoccupation but rather connotes disrespect and improper behavior. More appropriate to many lesbians are the labels tom and dee. These are shortened versions of "tom-boy" and "lady." Toms are the more "masculine" of the couple, while dees are the more "feminine." Anjaree, the first lesbian organization in Thailand, has created a new term in Thai for lesbianism and uses it officially to identify the group: ying-rug-ying or "women who love women."

ATTITUDES WITHIN THE FAMILY

Thai culture allows women to interact closely with one another. This often makes it hard to determine whether women couples are in fact lovers or just friends. Two

women can live together for an extended amount of time, hold hands, hug in public, sleep in the same bed, and even raise a child together without much opposition, because such relationships are generally not seen as sexual. Unfortu-

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nately, such relationships are denied the social recognition that heterosexual marriages are accorded, and parents accept such relationships only so long as the sexual nature of the relationship remains hidden.

For example, tom and dee relationships are often opposed by parents because the sexual nature of the relationship is clear. In such cases, parents often use forced marriages to "cure" the daughters' "abnormality." As a result, many lesbians suffer extreme confusion and self doubt. Many young women flee their homes due to the pressure to marry or to stop seeing their woman lover; some commit suicide.

One such case was reported at a recent seminar in Bangkok. A woman from Bokwan village, Muang district, Nongkhai province, gave the following report:

The story started when a woman in Nadee Village in Nongkhai Province came to work at Udonthani Province. She was 16. At the workplace she met one woman from Udonthani. They fell in love and reached the level that they bought rings for each other and wanted to get married. But the parents of this young girl of 16 wanted her to get married to a man. She didn't know what to do. When we heard the news about this again she had already hung herself. The ring was still on her finger.

Asked if the parents felt sad about their daughter's sui-

cide, the woman replied:

Not at all. Nobody accepts it when women would like to marry women. Now that she's dead, they say she deserved it... The villagers talked amongst themselves that she should die, this kind of person.¹

DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE

Gender and sexuality are identities that are expressed in language, attitude, and behavior. Toms, who manifest "masculine" qualities such as short hair and pants and speak with the masculine form of language,² are often more visible than dees. Toms do not fit into the typical Thai image of a feminine woman and often face malicious gossip, harassment, and discrimination. Most decision-makers in workplaces in Thailand are men who hold strong views about "proper" (i.e., feminine) appearance, and many jobs require women to wear skirts. Toms often have to hide their identity in order to get a job, and the discrimination does not stop at the job interview. Many lesbians must hide their identity throughout their careers. They cannot speak or act in any way which would show that they are lesbians.

MASS MEDIA

If it is mentioned at all within Thai society, lesbianism is considered to be an abnormality or a passing phase. Reflecting the attitudes that prevail in Thai society, the media generally perpetuates the view that lesbians need to be "cured." News reporters of all sorts make fun of lesbian relationships and write about lesbianism as the result of a broken home or a woman's bad experiences or failure in having relationships with men. Few, if any, lesbians have confronted the mass media about these portrayals because such

images are extremely entrenched in Thai society and are often internalized by lesbians themselves.

Thai academics and mental health professionals view lesbianism as a deviation from normal behavior. Most believe that homosexuality needs to be treated with therapy.³



Lesbian activist Anjana Suvarnananda, addressing an international lesbian and gay

LESBIAN ORGANIZING
Anjaree is the first lesbian organization in Thailand. It was founded by a small group of Thai lesbians in 1986. The first aim of the organization was for its members to have a safe space in which to meet and hold social events. The organization grew out of the women's movement, and Anjaree at first served mainly lesbian feminists

and their friends. However, the majority of Thai lesbians are not active within the feminist movement, and over the past few years Anjaree's membership (which currently numbers over 300) has grown to include a much broader spectrum of women.

In 1990, Anjaree hosted the first Asian Lesbian Network (ALN) meeting in Bangkok. This meeting had a strong impact on Anjaree, as did a 1991 workshop on violence against lesbians at an international conference held in Bangkok.⁴ More lesbians paid attention to the organization, and the inspiration and strength acquired from these meetings encouraged Anjaree to become public about its existence. Anjaree did not trust the mainstream press and did not know how the public would respond to the organization. Many members feared being rejected by family and friends if their membership in the organization became known. Since

no women had ever come out publicly as lesbians in Thailand, Anjaree members had no examples to follow.

As a result of the workshop, a small Bangkok paper interviewed a member of Anjaree. The paper was read only by a small number of people and Anjaree received hardly any response. In early 1993, Anjaree agreed that its name and address could be printed in a column in *Strange*, a sensational weekly magazine. The column in which Anjaree had its information printed was a question-and-answer column primarily aimed at gay men. The organization received a significant response from this particular coverage. Apparently, many of Anjaree's current members found out about the organization through this column.

Anjaree has increasingly drawn the public's attention in the past year. Articles on lesbianism with interviews of Anjaree members have appeared several times in both the Thai and English-language press, and the tone of such articles is becoming more positive.⁵ Anjaree has appeared in magazines, local papers, and on a national TV program. Anjaree holds regular meetings and social events, publishes a bimonthly newsletter, and receives letters from women all over Thailand.

Within the Thai women's movement, lesbianism is not widely accepted as part of feminism. In 1994, however, Anjaree representatives began to attend local, regional, national, and international meetings on issues concerning women. On International Women's Day on March 8, 1995, Anjaree appeared with other grassroots women's organizations in a march for women's rights in Bangkok and was among the organizations to present a letter to the Deputy Prime Minister. In the letter, the groups demanded changes in Thai laws and public policy to improve conditions for women.

NOTES

- 1 Supaporn Attamongkol, "Violence Against Women in Thai Society: The Quiet War Without Borders," in Krittaya Adohawanijskul, ed., *Khiang Rang Sang Phandin (The History of Ordinary Women Struggling)*, Bangkok: Foundation for Women, 1995. This information was first reported in a seminar on "Thai Women in the Next Decade: Grassroots Women to the World Conference on Women in Beijing," Emergency Home for Women and Children, Bangkok, 29 November 1994.
- 2 In Thai, many forms of speech vary depending on the gender of the speaker and of the person being addressed.
- 3 For a discussion of homophobia within the psychiatric profession, see "Parents' protectionism 'tied to surge in lesbianism,'" *Nation*, 17 July 1994, p.A1.
- 4 The workshop took place at a 1991 conference on Violence Against Women organized by War Resisters International and five Thai women's groups.
- 5 For example, Varaporn Chamsanit, "Women who love women," *Nation*, 25 September 1994, Focus Section pp. C1-C2; Tessanee Vejponogsa, "Thai NGO to press for lesbians' rights," *Bangkok Post*, 29 July 1994; Parwa, "'Phuying' kap thang say ti saam" ("Women and the third way"), *City Life Magazine*, 5 July 1994, pp. 78-80.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kanokwan Tarawan lives in Chiang Mai and is an active member of the Chiang Mai branch of Anjaree, the first and only lesbian organization in Thailand.