

Zimbabwe

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In 1982, the first lesbian group in Zimbabwe, which consisted of about twelve white women, began to hold weekly meetings in Harare. This group existed primarily as a lesbian support group and meetings provided an opportunity for lesbians to discuss various issues, such as isolation, "coming out," and relationships. The meetings took place at a different venue each week and slowly the number of women participating increased. As time went by and the discussions started to flag, the support group began to be replaced by cultural evenings. These evenings became very popular and bisexual and straight women began to attend.

The Monday night lesbian group also encouraged the formation of a support group for bisexual women, which began to meet regularly. The original group stopped meeting in 1984, and in 1988, the Women's Cultural Club (WCC) was formed to fill the gap that was felt in the lesbian community. The membership of the WCC was predominantly white but also included some Black women. The WCC stopped meeting after a few years, but since 1994 it has been

revived and the group currently organizes parties and cultural events for lesbians.

In 1988 Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) was formed by a group of people who were interested in providing social events for lesbians and gay men. The birth of GALZ gave rise to a new energy in the lesbian and gay community in Zimbabwe. GALZ began publication of a regular newsletter, introduced a membership structure, and started to organize social events of various kinds.

Lesbians have been very visible in the administration of GALZ and through this have been able to maintain a lesbian presence in the magazine and at social functions. Unlike earlier groups, GALZ has a large number of Black members; while most are male, the number of Black lesbians in GALZ has been steadily increasing as the organization becomes more visible.

LEGAL SITUATION

Male homosexual acts are illegal under the Zimbabwe penal code. Although lesbians could in theory be subject to arrest under the statute (which prohibits "unnatural offences"), there are no known cases of it being enforced against lesbians. Even without legal prohibition, however, widespread social prejudices against lesbians serve to keep them silent. Many women will not receive mail from GALZ, or do so under pseudonyms; they fear that the discovery of their lesbianism may jeopardize their jobs or subject them to arrest. Many are similarly afraid to write checks to GALZ in case they can somehow be traced.

The Minister of Home Affairs, Dumiso Dabengwa, has said publicly on several occasions that "homosexuality is abhorrent and should not be allowed."¹ In 1993-94, the homes of a number of GALZ members were raided by police, and Mr. Dabengwa was quoted as saying that the police were "anxious" to make arrests: "We are going to arrest them. It is illegal in this country."² The Zimbabwe Human Rights Associ-

ation has issued written statements opposing this campaign of harassment and threats, but few others in Zimbabwe have come to the defense of GALZ. In this climate of fear, few individuals will publicly acknowledge that they are lesbian or gay. There are a number of well-known figures in the media and the entertainment industry who could provide a public face for lesbian and gay concerns, but they will not speak out for fear of losing their jobs.

THE NEWS MEDIA AND LESBIANS

Currently, GALZ has been shut out of the media completely. In 1994, the organization attempted to run a counseling advertisement in the Herald, a national newspaper. The notice, which read "For advice, support and counselling contact Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe," was refused on the grounds that the Herald is a "family newspaper." GALZ has issued numerous press statements in response to a recent spate of sensational press coverage featuring homophobic statements from President Robert Mugabe, Minister of Home Affairs Dumiso Dubengwa, and other government officials; however, these statements have rarely been printed.

The media attention on homosexuality has focused almost exclusively on the issue of sodomy, and lesbians are very seldom mentioned. A rare exception to this rule is an occasional article such as the one which appeared in the June 1992 issue of a tabloid-style women's magazine called Just for Me. While the veracity of the "lifestories" included in the article is perhaps questionable, the preface gives a clear sense of the prevailing attitudes toward and stereotypes of lesbians within Zimbabwean society: the author confessed that she was hesitant to take the assignment and expected to be "groped and molested (and threatened)" by the lesbians she interviewed.³

T.M.'S STORY

I am twenty-four years old and I was born in Gokwe.

[My girlfriend and I] are always on the run because my parents are against what I am. 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. They did throw me out eventually thinking that, as I was not employed, I would end up going to this man's house. Instead, I went to stay with my friends.

I went for an abortion and I was in the hospital for a month. After that, I used to hide whenever I saw my relatives. I did not contact them for six months. The police were looking for me so I used to move during the night only. In the end, the police found me and took me home where I was locked up and beaten until I could not even lift my arms or get up.

I stayed in that room for months pretending I was sick so they would not bring the horrible man again but they did and I fell pregnant again. I ran away and went to stay with my girlfriend. I did not go for an abortion this time because I was scared it would kill me. The first time had been really painful. I kept the pregnancy until I had a miscarriage at seven months and the baby died. 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

CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF LESBIANS

At the same time that the mainstream media is failing to provide positive images—or any images at all—of lesbians, lesbian publications are subjected to strict censorship. Images of gay men have filtered into Zimbabwe through films such as Philadelphia. In contrast, lesbians never get to see a positive portrayal of their lives unless they are sent material directly from friends overseas.

The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories was recently banned, as was the British lesbian magazine Diva, which GALZ had submitted to the Censor Board for approval to mail to GALZ's lesbian members. When the homes of several GALZ members were raided by the police in 1993-94, the material seized by the police was all non-pornographic but the words "lesbian" and "gay" were enough to result in their seizure. Items seized included a book of lesbian and gay poetry, an international directory of bisexual groups, and a catalog from a South African art gallery. Although GALZ is planning to take part in an upcoming annual book fair, the group's request to participate was initially refused despite this year's theme of Human Rights and Justice.

EMPLOYMENT

Few lesbians are open about their sexual orientation at their jobs. Although little research has been done on the subject, a recent informal poll confirmed their fears. In researching its article on lesbians in Zimbabwe, Just for Me magazine asked 20 employers if they would employ a woman whom they knew to be a lesbian. Fourteen said no, citing the following reasons: a bad reputation for the firm; she might make passes at other female employees; she must be unstable if she chooses that way of life; women with a husband and children are more stable. Three said they would do so only if she remained silent about her les-

bianism, and all of them said they would not allow her partner to participate in company functions. Two said they would do so only if her qualifications were outstanding and there were no one else suitable for the job; both stated that they would choose equally qualified people, particularly men, if given the choice. Only one—a British man who had lived in Zimbabwe for four years—said yes unconditionally.

HEALTH CARE

GALZ launched an initiative in 1992 to try and educate medical practitioners about lesbians and gay men. This project was begun in response to reports from lesbians that some of their problems were being attributed to use of the contraceptive pill; they were being placed in a position of either having to lie to their doctor or "come out" as a lesbian. With regard to mental health workers, GALZ has a general sense that the majority do not try to convert lesbians and gay men into heterosexuals, although a few have been known to use biblical arguments against homosexuality.

PRESSURE TO MARRY

Many Black women face great pressure from their families to marry. GALZ has documented cases of families trying to "cure" lesbians (see sidebar). A large majority of white people still living in Zimbabwe after Independence are ultra-conservative, and while white lesbians may not experience as much direct pressure to marry, they are pressured to conform to society's expectations of "proper" feminine appearance, and their relationships with women are often harshly condemned.

PARENTING

Lesbian mothers receive little support from society as a whole or, unfortunately, from the lesbian and gay community. Lesbian mothers are not yet visible or vocal enough to have created room within the lesbian and gay movement to discuss the particular issues that they face.

Most lesbian mothers in Zimbabwe have children from previous relationships with men. Lesbians seeking to become pregnant through donor insemination face numerous difficulties. One couple approached a female gynecologist in Harare who was so vehement and disapproving that she reduced one of the women to tears. GALZ took this matter up with the Health Professions Council (a government body) and asked them to investigate the matter. As with all of GALZ's communication with the authorities, this request went unanswered. In this area as in many others, the relevant government body has failed to address the discrimination that lesbians face within Zimbabwean society.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, "ZCC urged to help process missionaries' permits," Herald, 12 January 1995.

² "Police Warn Homos," Daily Gazette, 24 January 1994.

³ "Lesbians," Just For Me, June 1992, pp. 18-21.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bev Clark has been active in Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) for the past five years.