



Closets Are Not For Us:

VIEWS FROM FIVE LESBIANS

compiled by Leti Boniol

There are more and more of them speaking out—in the media, in conferences and forums, and even in the classrooms. The last 20 years seem to have been kinder for them. There is a general opening up of most Asian societies to more options for the genders. For one thing, there is more information now; women have become more financially independent and there is an increased consciousness of women's rights by society in general. In the past, they merely existed independent of each other; today, there are groups and even communities of gays and lesbians networking with each other.

In China, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people's communities started to emerge after the adoption of a new reform and open-door policy about 20 years ago. More information helped promote diversity in people's lives. Gay bars, lesbigay hotlines, publications, movies and other artistic works begun to appear and lesbigay groups were established. This was the report made by Yanhai Wan before the 4th Asian Lesbian Network Conference held in Manila in

December 1998.

In Korea, while lesbian groups were rumoured to exist, they were rarely acknowledged, if at all, by the mass media until the 1990s, according to another country report. In Malaysia, economic independence for many lesbians has been the key to attaining their own sexuality, reveals a report by Nadiah Bamadhaj presented during the same conference. In Thailand, a lesbian movement was organised in 1986, while in India, the first organisation of lesbian and bisexual women was formed in Bombay only in 1995.

But while gays and lesbians are now viewed more liberally, many problems remain, among them state repression, discrimination in the workplace, and at home. In Malaysia, the state is the main repressor of lesbian rights. There are no laws outlawing homosexuality, transsexuality or lesbianism but the judiciary interprets certain laws to repress Malaysians' rights to determine their own sexual orientation. Transsexuals are often arrested and charged under Section 21 of the Minor Offences Act, reports Nadiah Bamadhaj. The offense is called "indecent behaviour" and is punishable by fines or jail

terms and a haircut. Sodomy and oral sex are also illegal under Malaysia's Penal Code. In China, restrictions on forming nongovernment groups affect the formation of lesbian organisations. Persons found to have same-sex encounters are arrested. Another problem is the classification by the Chinese Psychiatric Association of homosexuality as a mental/sexual disorder subject to medical treatment. Conversion therapy is applied, sometimes forcibly, to "cure" people of their sexual orientation. Health and social services are inadequate. In Thailand, physical violence especially rape, against lesbians is also a problem, according to Andrew Matzner in an article in *Women in Action* (No. 3, 1998). In India, a number of lesbians and gays and their supporters are petitioning for the repeal of a section of the Penal Code which criminalises homosexual acts. So much remains to be done.

WE CAN'T COME OUT WITHOUT SOME MAN ASKING IF HE CAN WATCH US MAKE LOVE WITH OUR PARTNERS, OR IF HE CAN JOIN US IF WE DO.

How do lesbians from Asia view themselves in the context of social and cultural discrimination and oppression? In the light of the advancement of women in most parts of the world, are the views about lesbianism and sexuality also changing in Asian societies?

Women in Action (WIA) solicited the views of lesbians, and five of them responded—Melinda Madew, a Filipina based in Fiji; Luisa Tora, a Fijian from the University of South Pacific; Jom, an executive from Bangkok, Thailand; Gai, a Thai; Cavidan Hayat, from Turkey; and Malu Marin, Executive Director of the non-government organisation Can't Live in the Closet (CLIC) based in the Philippines.

To be a lesbian means to be hidden in your job, in your family and in your society, says one response. "We can't walk on the street without some bigot yelling out homophobic comments at us," says another.

But the picture is not so grim. The change is coming from the younger generations, says the Fijian. Malu Marin says a lot of work remains to be done. "It may take centuries to unravel the intricate web of homophobia and heterosexism but the work has started and is,

in fact, moving at a very fast pace."

WIA editors have made little editing on their responses, to make their voices heard more authentically. Here are their responses:

How has society limited the options of lesbians?

Luisa Tora: We can't marry our partners.

We can't adopt.

We can't come out without our parents trying to marry us off.

We can't come out without some man asking if he can watch us make love with our partners, or if he can join us if we do.

We can't hold hands in public.

We can't come out without some ignorant person asking if we were abused as children, if we hate men, or saying, we just haven't met the right man yet.

We can't walk on the street without some bigot yelling out homophobic comments at us.

We get fired because of our sexuality.

We are asked if we want to be men.

Jom: In Thailand, the barrier is more for the tom-boyish type of lesbian because they are more likely to be the ones who stand out. In a rather conservative working environment, it would be hard for them to get anywhere, unless they run their own business. And I don't think we have any legal platform for gay couples and or welfare/insurance benefits.

Gai: I was born and raised in Thailand but spent most of the last 10 years as a student in the U.S. I have lived as a queer in the U.S. during the past four years and visited Thailand twice. As a home return is coming up shortly, I am very much concerned with how to deal with my queerness. For the first time, being queer becomes a problem I will have to deal with carefully so as not to lose a sense of self-respect. Thai society as I know it can be very flexible with lesbianism as it operates on a "don't ask, don't tell" principle.

People can be very comfortable with a lesbian as long as you don't say that is what you are. But those who label themselves as lesbians are likely to risk physical and sexual violence, discrimination in the workplace and ostracism. As a result, lesbians at risk of these various forms of violence need to exercise what I would call self-limiting practices. For example, being a lesbian or being labelled as such will make one conscious of where is a safe place to live,

work, and socialise. What kind of employment would accommodate one's sexuality? Women without cultural or economic capital will be at greater risk since they may not be able to direct their lives toward the paths they think is the best for them as lesbians.

Cavidan Hayat: In Turkey, if you are a lesbian you must be hidden in your job, in your house, in your family and in your society. To be a lesbian in Turkey means to be open to every kind of abuse, insult, and harassment.

In your workplace, you will not be considered a woman but something else whisperable. Moreover, you will not be considered for a managerial or any decisive position. You will be teased by your colleagues and will be the subject of their gossips. You will not be able to have a direct and honest face-to-face

not to leave your diary around. You will not be able to introduce your lover to your parents. On the phone, you will speak with your lover as if she is your close friend. You will hide your thoughts about marriage, sex and love. Your parents will imply or tell you openly that you are not a good daughter after all their labours and efforts because you couldn't find a man to marry. They will look at you with a question in their eyes: "What is wrong with my daughter?"

You will feel damn "PERVERT WEIRDO" in their "PURE" and "REAL" world.

In your society, you should not hold, touch and kiss your lover in public. You should not dance, hug and be physically close to each other. You will not be able to marry her. You will be attacked by people who have no tolerance for such untraditional sexual preference. You will be beaten by the police or Muslim fundamentalists or by just any man ('how come you prefer to love a woman while I'm just here for you?') You will not be able to work in human rights organisations or in socialist parties.

You will feel damn outsider in their "COLLECTIVE" world.

I think the Turkish society can not tolerate sexual differences not only because it has conservative Islamic background but also because it is a male-dominated society.

Melinda Madew: Lesbians, like all women, have allowed society to impose limitations on every aspect of their lives. All these stem not only from a patriarchal, but also heterosexist pattern of social interaction. Male domination over women is not the only question lesbians face. We also have to contend with the heterosexism of other women who have not been able to accept the fact that lesbianism is a healthy and normal expression of female sexuality.

Cultural and religious bigotry against us is tolerated, if not encouraged by states, churches and other powerful institutions. Lesbians have never stopped claiming lesbian rights as human rights despite institutional and systematic discrimination.

Malu Marin: There is such a thing called "the norm of heterosexuality," which is the assumption that all human beings are heterosexual in orientation. This assumption is manifest in all structures of society and it places lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders in a very marginal position vis-a-vis heterosexual people. For



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The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Pride March '98 in Manila, Philippines.

conversation. Your instincts to touch and to be physically close (to people/to your friends) will also be limited.

You will feel damn "ABNORMAL" and alone in their "HEALTHY" and "NORMAL" world.

In your house, you'll need to find "logical" and "valid" reasons to answer such questions as "why aren't you married yet?" or "where is your husband?" You'll try to assure your neighbours that you have a boyfriend but he is working abroad. If you have a lover, you'll tell them that she is your niece. In order not to offend your neighbours or society in general, you will have to invent all sorts of lies.

You will feel damn dishonest in their "HONEST" and "PERFECT" world.

In your home, you have to be very careful

instance, there are many rights and privileges under the law that apply ONLY to heterosexual people. Too, the media severely restricts access to information for and by lesbians. And because almost all major religions are against lesbianism and homosexuality, many lesbians and gays feel that they are robbed of their

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Freedom starts in our minds.

choice to practice and express their religious or spiritual beliefs.

In addition, lesbians are women (or consider themselves to be women) and as women, their lives and choices are further governed by the ruling patriarchal order. As women, they are vulnerable to sexual and physical violence by men. Many lesbians are pressured to conform to roles and behaviour traditionally expected of women. As with a lot of women, many lesbians have limited access to material resources. Lesbians, unlike their male gay counterparts, are not known to possess a particular niche in society. They have fewer access to cultural and artistic spaces and the few who are able to break in generally have a much harder time maintaining their foothold in that space because there is no such thing as a lesbian network that exists to support them.

Do you think there are changing attitudes/perceptions towards this?

Luisa Tora: I think there is some degree of change in some pockets of society—mostly among the younger generation. Some people have become more supportive of lesbians because lesbianism is an extension of their feminism. I think little has changed as far as formal lesbian support

systems go. Very little information is available to help lesbians make informal decisions about our reproductive health or legal matters or any other issues involving lesbians. I thought the inclusion of sexual orientation in the antidiscrimination clause in the new Fiji constitution meant we were making a step in the right decision. I was wrong. Christian fundamentalists marched (on constitution day) against the inclusion of sexual orientation, saying it encouraged gay people to marry. It is easy to be cynical, but I am a bit optimistic about the future. The Human Rights Commission came into effect today. We might be moving slowly in Fiji, but at least we're moving in the right direction.

Jom: Yes, I think lesbians, and gays for that matter, are becoming more visible these days in Thailand. Maybe it's because I just started to really look around and pay attention to people around me. There are many openly gay establishments while the lesbian places are still relatively few. I want that to change. For example there are many gay magazines here and magazine stands at selected bookstores do have *Gay Times* from England but not *Diva*, its sister publication. I would like that to change.

Gai: In Thailand, generally, I think that while lesbians are quite visible in urban areas and are believed to be members of urban society, they are accepted only in certain economic sectors, e.g., advertising and publishing. Meanwhile, it is generally believed that lesbianism is a Western phenomenon and very untraditionally Thai. There is a lot to be learned about the history of lesbianism in Thailand. I believe that being a lesbian was once accepted in rural and traditional Thai society. However, its acceptance in these areas seems to decline.

These attitudinal changes may relate directly to how discrimination against women and against lesbians are structurally determined by state heterosexist-nationalist discourses about the Thai traditional culture, as well as by policies and laws which have restricted women's rights and subordinate women's positions to men's.

Urban spaces that are more welcoming for lesbians may be created by migration practices, in which individual women have greater freedom to practice their chosen sexuality.

Cavidan Hayat: I don't think the Turkish society is ready to tolerate lesbians. Today, lesbians are more organised but the basis of their organisation is mainly sexual rather than political. I believe the freedom for lesbians to express themselves will come with the freedom of women. And the freedom of women will come with society's freedom. Tolerance and respect for differences *must* come from and sit in our hearts, not only for lesbians but also for leftists, revolutionaries, transvestites, prostitutes, transsexuals, and street children. And I believe freedom starts in our minds.

THE LESBIAN MOVEMENT REACHED A LEVEL OF POWER AND INFLUENCE IN MANY SOCIETIES BECAUSE THERE WERE COURAGEOUS WOMEN WHO DARED TO BITE THE BULLET, FACED PERSECUTION AND CHALLENGED THE DOMINANT SOCIETAL ORDER.

Melinda Madew: First, there must be evidence that lesbians have begun to change attitude about themselves before we call for societal changes. So-called societal attitudinal change is reduced to tokenism, if not an appeal to be patronised, if as lesbians we do not assume responsibility over how we must rise beyond discrimination and outright persecution. This means asserting our political influence, space and visibility not only in the women's movement, but also in all other spheres of life.

The lesbian movement reached a level of power and influence in many societies because there were courageous women who dared to bite the bullet, faced persecution and challenged the dominant societal order.

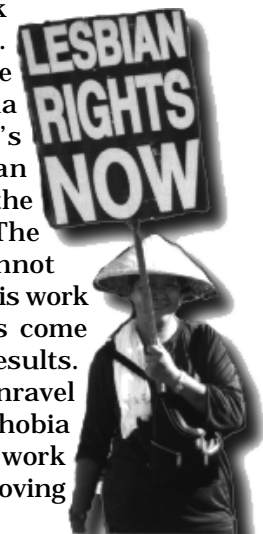
There is a changing societal attitude and this has come in consonance with lesbians themselves changing their attitude about themselves and what they can contribute to a strong movement.

Malu Marin: In the last five years, the lesbian movement in the Philippines has been actively engaged in fighting sexism and discrimination against lesbians. As with other movements that endeavor to change consciousness, the results of this collective activist work can only be reaped over time. It cannot be denied that some inroads

have been made. For instance, CLIC has been able to undertake dialogues and discussions with some sectors within the Catholic Church. Many of those who attended the dialogues (Catholic nuns, seminarians, theology teachers, lay missionaries) attest to the importance of holding such sessions in order to facilitate a more enlightened and certainly progressive understanding of lesbian issues and concerns. Lesbians and gays have also begun a more conscious and programmatic approach to legislative advocacy. This recent effort has resulted in the filing of a proposed law (House Bill 7165) recognizing the rights of lesbian and gays, an imperfect but significant legislative proposal. One very important but relatively unknown development is the inclusion of positive and nonjudgmental mention of homosexuality and bisexuality in the Core Messages of the Population Education Program of the Department of Education, Culture and Sports.

In the media, the presence of "Lezz Talk" (formerly "Rainbow Rap"), a four-year old twice-monthly lesbian column in a mainstream magazine has done a lot in providing unbiased information to lesbians and nonlesbians. Yet, while there has considerably been more visibility for lesbian issues in the broadcast media, the treatment of the subject leaves much to be desired. In literature, the launching of *Tibok, Heartbeat of the Filipino Lesbian*, a collection of personal essays, poetry and other writings, is also proof of the mainstreaming work being undertaken by lesbians. Filipino gay men, on the other hand already have quite a number of literary publications.

There is a lot of work that remains to be done. Lesbian issues have yet to be incorporated in the agenda not only of the women's movement and the human rights movement, but of the entire NGO community. The Philippine government cannot be expected to undertake this work though surprisingly, it has come up with a few interesting results. It may take centuries to unravel the intricate web of homophobia and heterosexism but the work has started and is in fact, moving at a very fast pace. ♡



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