

Circles: Buffalo Women's Journal of Law and Social Policy

Volume 4

Article 20

1-1-1996

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Recommended Citation

Ehman, Martha (1996) "Lesbians in Belgrade - Emerging from Invisibility," *Circles: Buffalo Women's Journal of Law and Social Policy*. Vol. 4 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/circles/vol4/iss1/20>

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Report from the Balkans

LESBIANS IN BELGRADE - EMERGING FROM INVISIBILITY

*by Martha Ehman**

"Being a lesbian in Yugoslavia means that you don't exist at all. You don't exist legally, you don't exist illegally." So states a recent report written by a young lesbian in Belgrade, Serbia part of the former Yugoslavia. Lesbian invisibility is internal as well as external. Sexuality in general is a taboo topic, causing many lesbians to struggle to identify their own internal sexual feelings and sexuality. Although no longer illegal, homosexuality continues to be viewed as an "illness," and young lesbians and gays face the threat of being institutionalized by their parents, in a place where shock therapy is not an unheard of method of treatment. Thus, it is a brave and radical act for women in the former Yugoslavia to acknowledge their feelings, let alone to reveal them to anyone else. The acknowledgment of non-heterosexuality is so outside the normalized experience of Yugoslav society that there is not a word or phrase in the Serbo-Croatian language for "coming out" as we refer to it in the United States. This is the context in which lesbians have been forming a burgeoning lesbian community in Belgrade.

"Arkadija," a group formed by and for, lesbians and gays, was founded in 1990 to confront invisibility and isolation. The group's purpose is to provide social and emotional support, advocate for social and political rights, connect lesbians and gays in Serbia with lesbians and gays in other parts of the world, and fund and promote publications by, about and for lesbians and gays.

The group first met in an apartment on the same floor as a psychologist's office, but were soon evicted when the psychologist discovered the group's nature. Undaunted, the group continued to meet and now consists of separate contingents of gay men and lesbian women. The lesbian group, known as Labrys, holds weekly meetings at various feminist organizations in Belgrade. Occasionally, the two branches meet together, as they did in June to celebrate Gay Pride Day and the Stonewall Rebellion. The women and men shared food and drink, told stories, danced and watched videos of public celebrations, saying, "next year we will be in the streets!!"

Labrys' primary goals are to increase self-awareness, self-respect and self-love for members. At Labrys meetings women find vital social support. As one lesbian stated: "Loneliness is knowing only one lesbian in Belgrade and that lesbian is yourself." Women come together to

participate in workshops on such topics as lesbian identity, lesbian feminism, "butch/femme," and safe sex. These workshops provide a forum for the discussion of ideas and opinions, as well as providing a safe place for women to acknowledge their love and attraction for women.

Although there are no laws against lesbianism in Yugoslavia, there is both discrimination based on sexual orientation and discrimination associated with not "being attached to a man." While most of the members of Labrys are not publicly "out" lesbians, they are still subject to discrimination if they choose to live without a male partner. During these times of war and extreme nationalism, women's reproductive role is intensified as a kind of military service. Women are seen as producers of Serbians and soldiers. Women who do not fulfill this obligation may be viewed as disloyal to the state. Arkadija reports that "women not attached to men" (i.e. non-reproducers) are seen as: "unable to find a man, immoral, crazy or unable to have children." According to Arkadija's report further problems of "women not attached to men" include: being the second choice for jobs (following married women); being the first fired; not being able to find an apartment (most landlords are suspicious of single women's character - they could be prostitutes or otherwise "immoral"); and the commonly held belief that they are deserving of any harassment or attack they receive on the street if out unaccompanied by men. Lesbians are in the double bind of being discriminated against as "women not attached to men," and, if they come out as lesbians, discrimination based on their lesbian status. As the women of Labrys see it: "no woman is free unless she is free to be a lesbian," free not to have to be attached to a man in order to validate her existence.

As in the United States, there is no federal protection against employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. Given the lack of tolerance for lesbianism in the former Yugoslavia, a lesbian faces discrimination and intolerance if her sexual orientation is revealed. As one lesbian who came out to her employer was told "everybody has a right to love and have sex, but don't be open. Don't kiss on the street. Don't be found in gay and lesbian clubs. You certainly are too clever to fight for gay and lesbian rights."

Arkadija works for social and political change to eliminate all forms of discrimination against lesbians and gays. Although one of the aims of Arkadija is to act as a lobbying group for the social and political rights of lesbians and gays, there is no culture of lobbying and the government does not respond to such efforts. Due to the current climate of political and economic instability within the government of the former Yugoslavia, it is almost impossible to achieve social or political changes through efforts which are aimed at influencing legislation. Current nationalism and oppression create a dangerous atmosphere for marginalized groups.

As a result of the current political climate, Arkadija employs other means to advocate for change. Members work toward the goal of increasing the public's awareness of the existence of gay and lesbian people. They achieve this by writing articles for publication in local papers and by conducting written and televised interviews. A recently televised interview conducted by a member of Labrys was the first televised appearance by an "out" lesbian in Yugoslavia. More controversial acts have included "graffiti campaigns" in which members spray painted buildings in Belgrade with such slogans as "DYKE POWER" and the double women's symbol. Since July, Arkadija has published a newsletter containing essays, cartoons, editorials and news articles by lesbians and gays. In addition, Labrys has recently published two books by lesbians, one prose and one poetry. This is the first time lesbian authors have been published in Yugoslavia.

Electronic mail serves an important role in connecting lesbians in Ex-Yugoslavia with lesbians in other parts of the world. Members of Labrys communicate with lesbians and feminists

by e-mail, or "fe-mail" as the women like to call it, exchanging information, solidarity, and political strategies with both individuals and groups. Labrys has recently joined the World Wide Web and can be visited at: <http://ww.igc.apc.org/neww/ceewomen/labrys.html>.