

State of the Art: Lesbian Movements in Former Yugoslavia

I. Lesbians in Croatia

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ABSTRACT The article gives an overview of the past and present situation on the Croatian lesbian scene – from the period prior to the war in Croatia (up to 1991), after the war (mid-1990s), right up to the present situation. The 'coming out' process of Croatian lesbians during the 1980s and 1990s has been determined by social and cultural homophobic indoctrination, which sends out clear messages about how deviant and unacceptable homosexuality is. Heterosexuality has traditionally been the imperative of social normality within Croatian society. Not being compatible with the social norm, lesbians are condemned by society to failure and isolation. Nevertheless, after the 10-year rule of a strongly nationalistic, rightist and patriarchal regime, recent political changes have brought Croatia to the threshold of a new transitional period. Even though the new Social Democratic and Liberal coalition government is sending mixed signals on many issues to do with gender equality, the homosexual population of Croatia can finally hope for better times to come.

KEY WORDS democratization ♦ deviance ♦ homophobia ♦ nationalism ♦ neopatriarchy ♦ political activism ♦ social invisibility ♦ unacceptability ♦ war

INTRODUCTION

It is my intention in this article to give readers an insight into the past and present situation on the Croatian lesbian scene. In the given context, I

choose not to speak of 'development', for its meaning is rather debatable if one reviews the issue of lesbianism as a political issue in Croatia during the 1980s and 1990s.

The article is partly based on research that I conducted for a period of five years and which is due to be published shortly in a book titled *The History of the Lesbian Movement in Croatia*, and partly on my personal atavistic experience dating from 1991, when I co-founded LIGMA (Lesbian and Gay Men Action – Zagreb).

It seemed appropriate to divide this overview chronologically: the period prior to the war in Croatia (up to 1991), after the war (mid-1990s), and the present. I conclude by presenting the latest news – events not even common knowledge among the Croatian public.

Before I move on, I just wish to say that I have tried to be as objective as I could.

THE 1980S: COMPLETE INVISIBILITY (PERIOD BEFORE THE WAR IN CROATIA AND BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA)

Croatian lesbians are forced to live in isolation and silence. Lesbians are not only isolated by society on grounds of moral contempt, but they are isolated from one another. This is due to a widespread fear of public exposure that is common among lesbians in Croatia and it results in their acceptance of heterosexual living space and heterosexual behavioural patterns in both the private and public spheres of lesbian lives. In a 'perfect society' there is no 'amoral' sexual behaviour, so in Croatia, during the 1980s, there was not a single public space where lesbians could meet, socialize and share their experiences. It is hard to live as an individual lesbian, but lesbian couples share the same fate because of numerous societal factors that condemn lesbianism and work to obstruct any development of a lesbian family.

The 1980s marked a development of the Croatian women's/feminist movement. Many lesbians who considered their sexuality to be a political issue entered the women's movement, but lesbians who were only looking for a safe environment to meet other women joined the movement as well in the late 1980s, when the first lesbian group was formed called Lila inicijativa (The Lila Initiative). This first Croatian lesbian initiative was launched in 1989 by a group of 15 lesbians who decided to fight the anonymity and isolation they were condemned to by a homophobic Croatian society.

The Lila Initiative was formed as a subgroup of the Women's Group Trešnjevka (a feminist group founded in 1986, and which ran a helpline for lesbians), encouraged by the organizing of lesbians worldwide, particularly in Slovenia. In fact, many of the women who joined the Lila

Initiative had been previously involved in various activities in Slovenia. Most of the women were aged between 25 and 35, with quite a few young girls, mostly 16-year-olds, who were strongly aware of their lesbianism. The group quickly defined its primary aims: to fight against lesbian anonymity, isolation and oppression. In accordance with these aims, the group worked on increasing lesbian visibility, confronting homophobia, the socialization of lesbians on a local scale, making international contacts and offering much-needed support to its members. They also produced and distributed a leaflet, which called for lesbian gathering and activism. The group's coordinator, Nataša, gave a few interviews in daily newspapers and weekly magazines. The group stayed active until the disintegration of Yugoslavia, when its activists went separate ways and are at present active in different women's groups.

THE 1990S: THE BEGINNING OF ORGANIZED ACTION (PERIOD DURING AND AFTER THE WAR)

The beginning of the 1990s saw the Croatian lesbian community still functioning within closed, small groups. Social stratification among Croatian lesbians did not allow for the mixing of different classes, professions, social ranks, and so on. Within the lesbian community, many lesbians had no real interest in issues like lesbian consciousness, feminism, lesbian human rights or political activism. Most young women from the scene expressed interest only in sexual activity, and they simply absorbed the sexism and machismo within society. This process of absorbing machismo resulted in the strong presence of a butch-femme dichotomy that varies according to social class and individual awareness of lesbian identity. Copying the macho patterns of Croatian society and applying it to their own patterns of behaviour within the lesbian community, most Croatian lesbians tend to feel more butch. They pursue macho activities like soccer or have wild nights out, partly in an attempt to avoid the strong patriarchal framework of their environment that imposes upon them the stereotype of the 'real' or traditional woman. However, this dichotomy is less prevalent among the younger lesbian population.

Lesbians living in provincial towns were forced to emigrate to the capital – the city of Zagreb – and to hide away from their families and the intolerable small-town mentality. Coming to Zagreb, they were faced with the fact that, once again, they had no safe place to be who they were, there was no lesbian meeting place and the capital of Croatia was heavily influenced by the Balkan mentality that guarantees little freedom for women, and even less for lesbians. Eventually, most of these lesbians had no choice but to emigrate to western countries (mostly the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, the USA and Germany).

The war, which lasted for several years, created a particular atmosphere that could only worsen the situation of lesbians in Croatia. Destruction and devastation of an enormous part of the country, Slavonia in particular, created an economic crisis that the government tried to keep under control by artificial means. Lesbians and young heterosexual couples alike had to depend on their heterosexual families in order to survive, as their own income was not sufficient for them to live independently.

A large number of refugees, displaced persons and war invalids created panic among an already insecure, war-threatened population. After the process of reintegration started in 1995, Croatian returnees, refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina and returnees from the Republic of Srpska having to live together all got caught up in a new nationalism.

Sexism, which has always been present in the Balkan region, blossomed under Catholic moral values. A man, being a warrior, became the new saviour of Croatia, marking the beginning of Croatian neo-patriarchy. Consequently, women's issues became more and more invisible and still remain so to a certain extent, especially women's participation in the political and public life of the country. Logically, with the disappearance of women's issues from the list of political priorities, it was obvious that the issue of lesbian human rights was nowhere to be seen and that our patriarchal society negated lesbian existence.

Media reports of rape on a massive scale affected women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) much more than the Croatian general public. War atrocities against women – killings, harassments and, more than anything, rape – were a part of the war strategy throughout the region of the former Yugoslavia. While rape camps became a public secret, imagine the situation if you were a lesbian in Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo. . . .

During the decade of the HDZ (Croatian Democratic Party), women were condemned to the role of breeding for young soldiers and pleasing men, as dictated by the propaganda of strong populist movements. In the given context, lesbians were labelled as dangerous and destructive for the new Croatian state and its moral values, and self-declared feminists were publicly called witches. Women intellectuals chose to emigrate; so did many lesbians.

According to Croatian law, lesbianism does not even exist; the penal law refers only to male homosexuality. At the same time, the mass media followed a rightist, nationalistic tendency and took to the lynching of both feminists and lesbians, making them look like shameful, despicable traitors to the new state and its so-called prosperity and freedom.

In this atmosphere of public harassment and persecution, Croatian lesbians had little option to develop their lesbian identity, lifestyle and culture. Most of them chose to stay in the closet, not having enough strength or support to drop their masks before their parents and friends.

This is partly due to the fact that because of high unemployment rates the younger generation had to depend heavily upon their parents financially.

Long-term lesbian relationships have been and still are rather rare, and sustainability of such relationships is more prevalent between more experienced lesbians (over 30). Sustainability of relationships is negatively influenced by economic crises, high unemployment rates and the unbearable pressure of Catholic and patriarchal morality. Women who moved to larger cities feel the need to gain experience and expand their circle of acquaintances, thus turning into the most visible lesbians on the scene. Women who are in serious relationships avoid the scene and larger gatherings in order to protect their relationships.

In the 1990s, among the Croatian general public the attitude towards lesbians was as negative as the attitude towards drug abuse, prostitution or other criminal actions – in fact, even more so, as there were many state-sponsored criminal acts to which a blind eye was turned. This can be illustrated in the leaflet on the prevention of HIV/AIDS, printed by the Croatian Ministry of Health in 1993, which addressed this issue by suggesting safe sex be practised by lesbians, sex workers and drug users.

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS LESBIANS: THE PREJUDICES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Public opinion commonly marks lesbians as heterosexual, man-hating women going through a perverse phase of their sexuality, or considers them as men trapped within women's bodies. Lesbianism has always been used by the mass media in sensationalist ways, in material produced for male voyeurs and in order to 'shock' heterosexual women. When searching for the roots of lesbianism, many people assume that lesbians must have suffered poor psychosocial backgrounds or are subject to health problems such as hormonal abnormalities, mental illnesses and so on.

Because these prejudices are deeply rooted and widespread, most lesbians have a very negative perception of themselves and their love for other women. They often suffer identity crises, trying to deny their sense of self (as a woman-loving woman). The collective result of all these factors is the invisibility of lesbians in Croatian society, today and throughout history.

LESBIAN SOCIAL LIFE

The 'coming out' of Croatian lesbians has been determined by the social and cultural homophobic indoctrination that sends out clear messages about how deviant, unacceptable and sick homosexuality is.

Heterosexuality is the imperative of social normality of Croatian society; its mantra is: 'Be successful, study, mingle, get engaged and marry, raise children ...'. Not being compatible with the social norm, lesbians are clearly condemned to failure.

In 1999, Croatia finally saw the opening of its very first official gay club, Bad Boy; however, it is dominated by gay men. The year of 1999 can be described as the most fruitful year yet for lesbian activities – numerous workshops were organized by Kontra, cultural happenings by Because Press and lectures in lesbian theory by the Centre for Women's Studies, Zagreb (these groups are described in more detail in the following sections). Nevertheless, lesbians have remained inert when it comes to political activity, and the basic criteria of having a safe, women-only meeting place is still unfulfilled. Many lesbians try to substitute this in cyberspace – they are active within the Croatian lesbian website, participate regularly in chatroom discussions, leave ads on message boards and so on.

Since the parliamentary elections in 1999, when the coalition of Social Democrats and Liberals won, Croatia has finally taken the turn towards the process of democratization that hopefully will include gender democratization and the development of a tolerant civil society as well. The expectations of minority groups, including the gay/lesbian population, of the new government are very high; the results remain to be seen.

SUPPORT OF WOMEN'S AND FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS DURING THE 1990S

Certain Croatian women's/feminist NGOs (NONA [the Women's Multimedia Centre], Women's Infoteka, the Centre for Women's Studies, the Centre for Women War Victims and others) were always the starting point for any organized lesbian activism, and their main source of support. Within these women's organizations, there were a couple of lesbians who worked on establishing a lesbian network; it was these women who founded Kontra and Because Press.

LESBIAN GROUPS DURING THE 1990S

Lesbian and Gay Men Action – Zagreb

Lesbian and Gay Men Action – Zagreb (LIGMA) was founded in August 1992 as an NGO, after operating for over a year as a section of the Transnational Radical Party (TRP), using their premises. After the foundation of LIGMA, the TRP still allowed them to use their office in Zagreb.

LIGMA was the first registered NGO dealing with the rights of homosexuals in Croatia. The coordinators, Amir Hanušić and Andrea Špehar, claimed at the time that LIGMA had some 30 members and the same number of sympathizers.

Croatian lesbians had decided to join the gay population in their fight in order to build a base for a more progressive lesbian movement. Autonomous action at that time could not yield serious results, not only because of financial problems but also because lesbians' passivity and fear prevented them from joining a lesbian group. The number of lesbians involved in the group's activities was half the number of gay men, a fact on which the group's lesbian coordinator Andrea commented:

There are many reasons why lesbians are so rarely engaged in a specific homosexual/lesbian culture. When a lesbian openly speaks out about her sexuality to her friends, family or at her workplace, we say that she 'came out'. Coming out in public for most lesbians is not simple, and the necessary requirement for it to be possible at all is that a woman/girl has accepted herself as a lesbian, and that she has started thinking about lesbianism in a positive way, which includes overcoming all the negative myths about lesbians as abnormal, immoral, perverse or non-existent, and has started to overthrow the influence of all the religious, social and family stereotypes according to which there is something wrong with a girl until she becomes a wife and a mother. In order to protect themselves from their intolerant environment, women are forced to hide their sexuality, and in this not only the social pressure but also financial dependence play an important part. . . . That is why all of us involved in LIGMA are trying to work on our own identity, and connect with each other to create a positive vision of lesbianism, and to fight for our political and cultural rights. (Cited in *Kruh i ruže* [Bread and Roses], Autumn 1993)

Unfortunately, in 1997, in spite of its enthusiastic beginnings, LIGMA ceased to exist. This NGO had found itself on the street with no financial means, and the few remaining activists quickly withdrew from the scene. During LIGMA's existence its activists had fought with constant financial struggles, the intolerance of society and an unfavourable political situation. The city authorities denied LIGMA the right to office space and public meetings. Since meetings could no longer be held at the TRP's headquarters, they were held in the private home of the group's secretary. The coordinator of the women's section, in order to preserve connections with foreign lesbian organizations, used the administrative services of one of the feminist organizations that was supportive of lesbians (namely, Women's Infoteka [the Women's Information and Documentation Centre]). They succeeded in publishing the supplement 'Speak Out' in two issues of the alternative magazine *Arkzin*. They also produced a four-page supplement dedicated to gay issues, including an essay on 'Homosexuality in Literature', in *Eros* (an erotica monthly). They publicly celebrated important days of the international lesbian and gay movement,

in particular 1 December, in memory of all the victims of AIDS.

Members of LIGMA were frequently present in the media, exposing their private lives and thus being prone to daily harassment. Both coordinators, Andrea and Amir, were rather well known and featured frequently in newspaper interviews. LIGMA was persistent in its appeals to the public, one of which was called 'AIDS Knows No Social Boundaries', directed to all accountable ministries: Culture, Education and Sports, Finance and Health. The media exploited LIGMA and its activities as sensational material with which it planned to attract the curiosity of readers and thus increase its sales. Overall, the media perception of LIGMA's coming out to the Croatian public was negative.

An article published in *Globus* (one of the best-selling Croatian weeklies) in 1993 gave a biased interpretation of a review of a comedy, *Night Flight*, which played in the ITD Theatre. The bold-face lead proclaimed: 'The militant activists of the Zagreb group for the rights of homosexuals and lesbians are protesting . . .'. The militant activists in this case were members of LIGMA who were protesting against the public derision of people of homosexual orientation, who were obviously mocked in the play. Similarly, the group members suffered vicious name-calling, which only served to discourage further their fight for the human rights of homosexuals.

LIGMA has attended numerous conferences for lesbian/bi/gay organizations worldwide, and has made a fair number of international connections, thus showing to the wider world that there is a lesbian and gay community in Croatia. Collaborating with foreign organizations had given LIGMA a fresh insight and created new aims to achieve at home in Croatia. Interestingly, in an interview given to a daily newspaper, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, in 1992, they stated that women in contemporary Croatia were far worse off since the Croatian Democratic Party (HDZ) had come to power, as women were being forced out of many spheres of social life, e.g. politics, and becoming a much marginalized group (women in Croatia constitute 51 percent of the population). At the end of 1993, a difference of interests became apparent, as result of which one fraction of LIGMA split and formed another group: Info-AIDS.

Info-AIDS and Women for Women

Info-AIDS, an NGO focusing on the prevention of HIV/AIDS, was founded on 16 January 1994. Besides its main activity, Info-AIDS dealt with the problems encountered by the Croatian lesbian and gay population. The members of this group, most of whom came from LIGMA, worked on a voluntary basis and were very active in printing leaflets, selling T-shirts and organizing theatrical events, exhibitions and press conferences regarding prevention of HIV/AIDS.

As part of Info-AIDS, a small subgroup of lesbians organized under the name Women for Women. The group's goals were prevention of HIV/AIDS in the lesbian community through education and helping HIV-positive lesbians in their everyday lives. Together with Info-AIDS, they set up the Info-AIDS Line on 22 February 1994, a 24-hour information service. The Info-AIDS Line became a way of making contact with other lesbians.

Women's Initiative

The following year, 1995, Women's Initiative, a group of women who had been gathering in Women's Infoteka, started a project of organizing women-only parties, spurred by the activities in Mobilus, a club that used to be situated in the city centre of Zagreb. It was the only club during the time that had a special gay/lesbian night every Saturday, organized by Info-AIDS. Activists of the project insisted that women needed a place to meet regardless of their sexual orientation, thus they started running women-only nights. On 3 July 1995, the first women's party was held in Mobilus. A few more parties followed, with a significantly diminished number of visitors, until the club closed down.

The Lesbian Publishing Project – Because Press

In 1997, in parallel with the founding of the networking organization Kontra, a lesbian publishing project was launched, Because Press. Its founders were aware of the fact that there were hardly any written materials on lesbianism in the Croatian language. This was also the case with the arts, in particular film; but what is even more appalling, is that there were hardly any scientific works or studies on lesbianism in Croatia. In the latter half of the 1990s some publications did appear, but they were translations of American and English publications.

Because Press dedicated itself towards the promotion of lesbian culture and literature. The founders claimed that in the given homophobic framework of Croatian society, lesbian consciousness and culture could spread in the fastest and most secure way via lesbian writing. Furthermore, due to a non-existence of Croatian publications on lesbian culture as well as a lack of translations of literature on lesbian theory, an average Croatian lesbian had no opportunity to benefit from any lesbian writing unless she was familiar with foreign languages. Even then, she was obliged to order lesbian books from abroad. Thus, a dozen enthusiastic lesbian women (most of them were already active within NGOs, mostly women's and peace organizations) joined up to try to fill the gap that had existed ever since the publication of *Dvije* (A Couple) in 1994. This anthology of lesbian poetry had been translated from English into Croatian by Borivoj

Radaković, whose latest translating venture is the translation of Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*.

In 1998, Because Press published *Igre ljubavi i ponosa* (The Games of Love and Pride) – the very first open lesbian book of poetry, by myself. At about the same time, Because Press also published *Just a Girl* – a lesbian fanzine that featured articles written by lesbians for lesbians; however, once again, approximately 50 percent of the pages brought in translated texts from British and American lesbian magazines such as *Diva*, *Girlfriend*, etc. The second issue of the fanzine appeared a year after the first. Before a third issue could be published, due to internal misunderstandings and rivalry among its activists, Because Press fell apart.

LESBIAN ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE PRESENTLY ACTIVE

Kontra

Kontra was founded in 1997 to motivate lesbians from all over Croatia to develop a lesbian network – a community that would bring together the efforts and activities of lesbians from across the country, from small towns and from the capital city, and link them to similar organizations from abroad.

Kontra's activists first started on their mission by organizing informal gatherings in KIC, a cafe in Zagreb known as a meeting place for gay men and women. It then expanded its activities to organizing various lesbian monthly events – projections of lesbian films, lesbian exhibitions, workshops and lectures addressing issues of coming out, violence in lesbian relationships, homosexual marriages, lesbian visibility, etc.

One of the major achievements of Kontra is a lesbian hotline for 'women who love women', which was launched on 24 November 1997 and has been running ever since.

Duda, the coordinator and founder of the project, shared her impressions gained while working on the hotline:

Women call from all over Croatia – most of them are young and rather shy. We have succeeded in staying in touch with most of them; quite a few came to our gatherings too. We receive many calls from men as well, most of them wanting to 'enlighten' and 'educate' us, 'help' us find a 'real' man. There are, however, always vulgar and threatening anonymous male voices to be heard as well, for the number of our hotline is frequently advertised.

According to the statistics kept by hotline volunteers, who wish to remain anonymous, up to January 2000, only 87 lesbians had 'dared' to seek help and advice through the hotline. Seventy percent of them are between 22 and 30 years old, 20 percent are over 30, while women under

20 make up the remaining 10 percent.

Reasons for their calls are mainly loneliness, feelings of isolation and the inability to find fellow human beings and partners: many women broke the silence of their lesbianism by calling the hotline – in 80 percent of the cases women sought advice on how and where to meet other lesbians; 20 percent needed to discuss their fears and identity problems (often linked to drug abuse and alcoholism).

In the meantime, Kontra opened a lesbian library within the library of the Centre for Women's Studies in Zagreb, and finally managed to organize a major public cross-cultural, cross-ethnic lesbian event in Croatia by hosting the international photography exhibition 'Lesbian ConneXion/s' in Zagreb.

RECENT EVENTS ON THE CROATIAN LESBIAN SCENE

On 27 October 2000, this travelling exhibition finally found its destination in the gallery of the Centre for Culture and Education in Zagreb, featuring 30 exhibits of international as well as Croatian authors, such as Mare Milin, portraying astonishingly different aspects of lesbian lives from all over the globe. Photographers Marian Bakker and Traude Buhrmann launched the project of the travelling exhibition for the very same reason of making people aware of an existing wide spectrum of lesbian lifestyles, options, meanings and visions of lesbian culture.

The opening of 'Lesbian ConneXion/s' in Zagreb brought together lesbians from across the entire region of the former Yugoslavia, and they came pouring in for this grand occasion that was, however, deeply marked by horrendous fear of public exposure. Thus, media representatives were kept as far away as possible, and even though this was the first lesbian event to take place outside the women's NGO community, it was celebrated by women activists only and some occasional, accidental visitors.

Of course, we could not have expected the exhibition to be opened by the mayor of Zagreb, as had been the case in Amsterdam and Ghent. But at least once the strongly patriarchal and rightist regime had fallen – an event which raised the expectations of the whole civil sector not only women's organizations – lesbian initiatives could start enjoying some objective media reporting on lesbian human rights activism and similar events.

An occasion that should certainly be hailed as well took place on 14 and 25 March 2000 in Zagreb, – this was the 'Lesbian Studies' seminar, organized by the Centre for Women's Studies for a second year running. In the meantime, according to the feedback, its participants are strongly hoping that it will become an annual event.

Both seminars involved visiting lecturer Rutvica Andrijašević, PhD in

women's studies in Utrecht, where she lectures lesbian theory. The seminar was structured according to contemporary teaching principles based on active participation.

Approximately 15 participants – most of them with an NGO background – gathered to first discuss evolution of terminology (e.g. from invert to gay, lesbian). What followed was debate over class theory within the lesbian subculture, as well as identifying disparities in the forced public image of lesbians promoted by lesbian activists vs lesbian reality in the western world. As most of the theoretical part relied on western models and lesbian theories, participants insisted on a more realistic approach considering the Balkan society norms and behavioural patterns that surround them.

The concluding part of the seminar focused on queer theory and relevant literature, that can hardly be found anywhere else except for the libraries of the Centre for Women's Studies and Women's Infoteka.

It should be underlined that the seminar and its continuity are of the uttermost importance for future development of specifically Croatian queer theory. However, due to the acute backwardness of this region in regard to acceptance of homosexuality, transsexuality and transgenderedness, we are still making pioneering efforts towards gender equality within a rigid homophobic environment.

CONCLUSION

Based on personal, atavistic experience, during the process of data collection and archiving, as well as conducting research (as noted earlier, my current research project focuses on 'The History of the Lesbian Movement in Croatia'), I allow myself to make a rather general, but objective observation that Croatian lesbians greatly lack a consciousness of lesbianism as a political issue. Looking to examples of developed lesbian movements in long-established democracies, I have learnt the necessity of political lesbian activism – in particular if we are to strive towards an anti-homophobic democracy. For we Croatian lesbian human rights activists, this is the one way to change our social reality.

Recent political changes have brought Croatia to the threshold of a new transitional period. Even though the new Social Democratic and Liberal government is sending mixed signals on many issues of gender equality, the homosexual population of Croatia can finally hope for better times to come.

If we analyse print media in 2000/1, the daily newspapers *Republika* and *Jutarnji list* featured several surprisingly positive articles reporting on the rigidly discriminatory attitudes of the Croatian society towards homosexuals. More than a year after its opening, and despite numerous public

protests and police harassment of its visitors, Bad Boy – the very first gay club ever opened in Croatia – finally got a non-biased reception in Croatian media. All of a sudden, stories of discrimination against gays and lesbians appeared in political, not scandalous or sensationalist, contexts, making it to the front covers of certain magazines and papers, together with reports attempting to point towards the necessity of passing a law on gender equality that would include sanctions for those discriminating against homosexuals, and would lay a foundation stone for the recognition of same-sex marriages. These public discussions were set in motion in January 2001, mostly by the proposal of a constitutional law on gender equality that was created by a team of two young lawyers and a professor from the Faculty of Law at the University of Zagreb. Sadly though, among the numerous public comments appearing in print and electronic media, only a few came from the homosexual population, and there have been no lesbian initiatives to approach the local government and lobby for gay/lesbian rights. I was asked to comment on the matter in the daily *Republika* and it was in fact my pleasure to insist on the necessity of non-discriminatory policies if Croatia is to start moving more closely towards open society and move on with the process of democratization, as it is understood in western democracies.

Surprisingly enough, last year Croatian independent publishers made room for lesbian novels and fiction – Andrijići d.o.o. published Jeannette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and Ženska infoteka published Erica Fischer's *Aimée & Jaguar*. Both translations were widely reviewed and *Aimée & Jaguar* made it to the bestsellers list (it should however be made clear that a Croatian bestseller only ever sells 200–300 copies in all). However, when it comes to scientific studies on homosexuality, Croatia is far behind other European states; there are hardly any Croatian publications on homosexuality.

It is clear that our society has finally taken a gradual turn towards the democratization of our present political system, towards realizing the expectations and needs of ethnic minorities. Political single-mindedness has made room for parliamentary democracy. Nevertheless, nothing can change overnight, especially if the changes concerned involve changing strongly patriarchal family structures and ways of thinking regarding women's role in society.

Croatian lesbians are nowhere near reaching the critical mass needed to empower activists and influence lesbian public visibility. Within the last year, there has been only one active lesbian initiative in the whole of the country and its members and activists still do not feel the need to register themselves as an NGO. This is very characteristic of the whole lesbian scene – lesbian activists have not yet taken activism to their hearts. They remain passive observers of societal changes and are definitely missing a convenient political moment. Most of them expect results without any

real engagement or effort, for the sake of keeping their identity secret and not risking their status and reputation within their community. They have partly absorbed the dominant attitudes of their heterosexual surroundings and are often applying strongly patriarchal, heterosexual behavioural patterns in lesbian relationships.

Unlike the 60 atavistic women's NGOs in Croatia that have a history of political organizing and electoral coalitions, Croatian lesbians certainly lack the educational basis for future political organizing and acting. We need a range of educational seminars, from basic feminist consciousness-raising (for many lesbians still see their lesbianism only as a sexual choice) to advocacy training. The two seminars that were organized by the Centre for Women's Studies and the numerous workshops organized by Kontra cannot fill the gap primarily because they have only tended to attract women activists from the Zagreb NGO scene, not lesbians from other parts of Croatia, or other types of lesbians.

We have to find ways of reaching out to women all over the country, who are still feeling lost and abandoned. The hardest part of our mission is to motivate and activate the isolated and inert part of the lesbian population and develop a collective lesbian consciousness about the need for lesbian rights advocacy.

Most of us are still introverts who meet other soul mates through personal ads in the print media or the Croatian lesbian website. Meetings and gatherings still find a place behind closed doors, in the privacy of people's apartments and the premises of a few friendly women's NGOs. Attempts at organizing a women-only night in Bad Boy failed due to the fact that very few women have the courage to show up at a gay/lesbian club.

Even among women's NGOs, there is little room for lesbian human rights. The groups that keep their doors open for lesbian activists are those situated in Zagreb, while feminist principles of supporting all women regardless of their age, nationality, sexual orientation, etc. remain a myth for many NGO activists in the provinces.

NEWS JUST IN

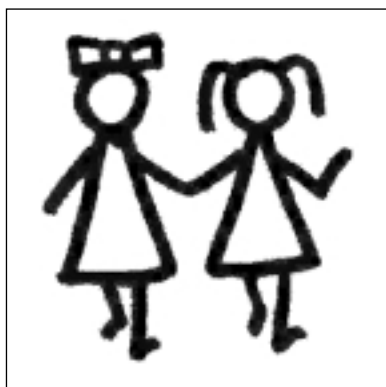
To end, I would like to point out a very important piece of information, not only for the Croatian NGO sector, but also for all those who are curious.

Only recently, on 19 October 2000, a founding convention of the first Croatian 'legal' (meaning that it has been registered as such) lesbian group was held. A month and a half later it was registered as an NGO based in Rijeka, a seaside town 200 km away from the Croatian capital Zagreb. The group was named LORI¹ – a group for homosexual women

and their supporters and founded by 20 women. They gathered from Zagreb, Rijeka, various Croatian islands, Slovenia and the USA in order to promote lesbian rights.

This is the beginning of a more thorough approach to lesbian issues, which include the economic, political and cultural dimensions of lesbian existence.

FIGURE 1
LORI (Lezbijska organizacija
Rijeka).



LORI identify their priorities as follows: creating a safe space for exchange of information and providing mutual support among lesbians; raising societal awareness with regard to lesbians, their existence, visibility and issues of lesbian human rights; advocating for lesbian rights in the media; and promoting overall tolerance. Like Kontra, activists of LORI intend to organize different workshops, happenings and lesbian cultural events.

A very significant fact is that LORI was given their office space by the local government. This is in fact the first time in Croatia that a gay/lesbian initiative has received support and

help from the local government. Furthermore, LORI received an additional gift from the city of Rijeka – their premises were repainted free of charge in bright pink. This is once again a clear sign that we are reaching the liberalization of society – to what extent we will stick to the road now taken remains to be seen.

Sanja K., president of LORI comments on the positive changes with some reserve, but still with a great deal of enthusiasm:

In Croatia, homosexuality is still not perceived as what it really is – a natural dimension of human sexuality. Nevertheless, we are witnessing a positive progress. More people are breaking the silence about their homosexuality, collective consciousness about the importance of democratic values is developing and public opinion on homosexuality has become much more objective. LORI is aiming for further changes within our community by linking lesbians throughout the country, by banning ignorance and showing that our richness lies in diversity.

All I can add is my hope that registration of the first openly lesbian NGO in Croatia is a good start, late though it may be. We must find ways of promoting our lesbian culture while the political moment lasts.

NOTE

1. More on LORI can be seen at their website, www.crogay.hr/lori/, or email: loricure@yahoo.com

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