

Jordan



Akhadar Assfar

Author's note: This statement was written to reflect my personal, individual perspective and not to speak on behalf of other lesbians in Jordan.

The difficulty in writing a report on lesbians in Jordan stems from the fact that we live our lives deprived of healthy and free chances, deprived of a forum in which we can express ourselves or shape any sort of understanding of ourselves as lesbians. There has been no research on lesbians in Jordan. There are no visible lesbian communities, no lesbian organizations, no services for lesbians. Even when we meet as friends and talk about our lives, we do not have a public language to describe ourselves. I may find myself talking with a "lesbian" (that is, a woman whose intimate relationships are with other women) but she may not wish to call herself a lesbian so our discussion cannot be estab-

lished or developed into action—either on the personal level, to build self-esteem and a sense of community, or on a public level, to promote greater understanding of our existence and the problems that we face.

Widespread prejudice is more powerful than any legal prohibition.

What is the reason for this invisibility, this absence of public discourse? Although Jordanian law contains no mention of the word *suhak* (lesbianism), widespread prejudice within Jordanian society is more powerful than any legal prohibition. Lesbians are afraid to be visible because they fear losing whatever freedom of movement they may have. Jordanian society is a closely knit, family- and religion-oriented one in which people know one another and there is little opportunity for anonymity. Even if a woman is financially independent, her family can still exert great control over her. The main support system is the family (rather than the legal or political system), but in the case of a lesbian who is open about her sexuality, the family itself may become the offender.

Although lesbians are unable to live their lives openly, small networks have been developing since the 1970s as part of the more general changes taking place for women. One of the most important of these changes has been women's increased access to higher education, in particular education abroad. The existing networks are limited to social groups that have no political form. Nevertheless, they provide a chance for lesbians to begin to discuss their issues. In the past five years, some individual lesbians have

begun to network with lesbians from other countries within and outside the region. Contacts with two Arab-American groups, the Gay and Lesbian Arabic Society and the Arab Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Network, have been particularly important because their members share a similar cultural background.

Lesbians in Jordan are without a mention, without recognition, very marginalized... YET WE EXIST.