

Russia



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In the last five years, with the general liberalization of Russian society and the emergence of a gay and lesbian movement, the situation for lesbians has improved a great deal. The prevailing attitude toward lesbians appears to have become more tolerant: we have no studies that measure the public's opinion of lesbians separately from gay men, but the most recent opinion surveys show that, though most people continue to believe that homosexuals in general are sick, the number of people who believe homosexuals should be left alone is growing steadily.¹ A number of lesbian and gay groups have formed in the last five years, making it easier for women to meet others like them—though isolation continues to be perhaps the most pressing problem for most lesbians. In general, official persecution of lesbians has declined drastically. Still, it continues to exist.

Since the early 1930s, when the Soviet government began its six-decade-long anti-homosexual witch-hunt, the psychiatric institutions have posed the greatest threat to

lesbians. Whereas gay men faced the risk of arrest, lesbians had to fear being institutionalized. And while the criminal law banning gay male sex was repealed in 1993,² the professional provisions that compel psychiatrists to "treat" lesbians have remained unchanged.

Two things have set the institution of Russian psychiatry against lesbians. One was a theory advanced by the founder of Soviet psychiatry, Andrey V. Snezhnevsky, who in the 1930s maintained that schizophrenia can manifest itself years or even decades before the onset of clinical symptoms through such signs as sleep disturbances, unconventional thought patterns (this idea proved lethal to political dissidents), homosexual behavior, and so on. This theory led to a diagnosis known as "slow-going schizophrenia" (*vialotekushaya shizofreniya*; this phrase is often erroneously translated by Russian doctors as "borderline person-

Olga, committed to a psychiatric institution for being a lesbian, was subjected to electroshock treatments and given drugs that severely altered her consciousness and caused

ality," when in fact there is no direct equivalent among conventional English-language diagnoses). The second factor was the inclusion of "homosexual orientation" in the section on personality disturbances in the diagnostic manual issued by the Ministry of Health.³

Until recently, it was exceedingly easy in Russia to commit someone to a psychiatric institution. Olga, 24, reports that when she was 17, a teacher at the technical school

where she was a student found out she was having a relationship with another female student. The teacher contacted a psychiatric institution, and both young women were committed. Olga's friend was released through the intervention of her parents, but Olga, who had only a mother who lived far away, remained in the hospital for three months. She says she was subjected to electroshock treatments and given drugs that severely altered her consciousness and caused hallucinations. After she was released from the hospital, she was compelled to register with a local psychiatric clinic, where she was required to check in regularly, and her passport was stamped to indicate she had a psychiatric illness. All this was standard procedure for people being released from psychiatric hospitals. Her status as a mental patient meant she could not go back to her studies since she was banned from any vocation that would put her in contact with people.⁴

A law passed in 1992 now makes it more difficult to commit a person to a mental institution against her will. However, according to an assessment done by the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, the law is difficult to enforce. In any case, it does not protect the most vulnerable group of lesbians: young women who have not reached legal majority and continue to be legally in the guardianship of their elders. Lena, 19, was committed to a psychiatric institution at the age of 17 by her mother. Her mother took this step because Lena wanted a sex-change operation. Such operations are legal in Russia and are carried out (under psychiatric supervision) far more frequently than in many countries. Lena had applied for the operation at the age of 15, when she was too young to have it legally. But when her mother found out about the application two years later, she had Lena committed. Over the months of "treatment," the doctors attempted to "correct" her gender and sexual identification with the help of various drugs.

The diagnostic manual used by Russian psychiatrists has been due to be revised for years now. The edition currently

used dates back to 1982; professionals familiar with the revision process say a new edition will be years in coming. The fact that "homosexual orientation" continues to be listed as a personality disorder has a dual negative effect: on the one hand, it means that those who enter psychiatric institutions involuntarily are given "treatment," and, on the other hand, it means that lesbians who may need or seek counseling are denied appropriate care. "Vera," 19, was involuntarily committed to a mental institution following a suicide attempt after being rejected by the young woman with whom she had fallen in love. In the hospital, the doctors began, as she says, "treating everything at once"—that is, her suicidal tendencies and her sexual orientation. Now out of the hospital, she continues to take medication in the hopes of "curing" her condition.

According to Aleksandr M. Poleyev, a professor at a Moscow postgraduate school for psychiatrists, where doctors from around the country come for periodic mandatory courses, while Moscow psychiatrists of great authority have come to believe that homosexuality is not a mental illness, local doctors—the ones who actually treat people—hold the opposite view. The existing diagnostic manual gives them a way to put their convictions to work.⁵

THE LEGAL STATUS OF LESBIANS

Lesbian sex, unlike gay male sex, has never been criminalized in Russia. The law against consensual gay male sex was repealed in 1993. However, the Criminal Code continues to make a distinction between heterosexual rape and homosexual rape. For nearly a decade now various groups have been working on a new code. Early this year, a draft of a new code made it through Parliament. When first submitted, the draft contained an article that punished nonconsensual "satisfaction of sexual desire through homosexual, lesbian or other perverted means." This article prescribed a milder sentence than the law against missionary-position heterosexual

rape. As one lawyer who worked on the draft explained, the logic behind that was that non-missionary sexual acts could not result in pregnancy.

In Parliament, the draft code changed for the better. The words lesbian and homosexual were removed, leaving just "perverted means," and the penalties for all rapes were made equal. In March, however, President Boris N. Yeltsin rejected the draft and sent it back to Parliament for further work. Lesbian and gay activists fear that the word lesbian may make it back into the document. Even if it does not, the phrasing "perverted means" is cause for concern: there is no definition of "perversion" in Russian law, but it is probably fair to assume that lesbian sex would be deemed to fit the term. The existence of separate laws concerning heterosexual and "perverted" rape paves the way for unequal enforcement of the laws. Many gay men who have served time in prison say they ended up there on trumped-up rape charges in part because of the homophobia of the police, who could not conceive of two men actually wanting to have sex with each other, and therefore assumed it to be rape. Lesbians fear that under the proposed new law the same charges may be used against them.

THE SOCIAL STATUS OF LESBIANS

Until five years ago, lesbian networks in Russia—the only ways for lesbians to make contact with one another—were informal and largely closed (newcomers could not be trusted, and the fear of persecution was too great to take risks). Now there are more formal lesbian organizations in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and the Siberian cities of Omsk and Novosibirsk. (None of these groups, however, are formally recognized by the governments.) All four cities have services to introduce lesbians to other lesbians (in Omsk and Novosibirsk, though, they are quite informal at this point); in addition, in Moscow there is an organization called Moscow Organization of Lesbians in Literature and the Arts (MOLLI),

which produces concerts, and in St. Petersburg a lesbian consciousness-raising group meets at the St. Petersburg Center for Gender Issues, a feminist organization. Occasional semi-public parties for lesbians are held in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The situation is significantly better than it was a few years ago, but it compares very unfavorably to that of gay men. In Moscow, there are two full-time gay clubs and numerous weekend gay discos, but these do not give lesbians the opportunity to meet one another. In all four cities where there are lesbian networks, organizers report that the people who come to them suffer from intense loneliness, often having never met other lesbians.

Fear of repression continues to make lesbian organizing—even of the purely social variety—extremely difficult. In Omsk, for example, an attempt to create a lesbian group at the local AIDS center failed not because there were not enough women who wanted to take part but because they feared they would be seen at the center, even if only by gay men, who used the same time slot.⁶ Isolation continues to be the central problem for Russian lesbians, and the gains of the last few years have made barely a dent in it.

NOTES

- 1 Nationwide survey conducted by the All-Russian Center for Research on Public Opinion, as contrasted with a survey conducted by the same center (then called the All-Union Center) in 1989.
- 2 Masha Gessen, *The Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men in the Russian Federation*. San Francisco: International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, 1994, pp. 24-33.
- 3 *Mezhdunarodnaya statisticheskaya klassifikatsiya bolezney, travm i prichin smerti*, 9th edition adapted for use in the USSR, Moscow, 1982, Section V.
- 4 The scenario was repeated in more than a dozen interviews done