

## Foreword

Charlotte Bunch

International Women's Year, MEXICO CITY, JUNE-JULY, 1975 – "What are the lesbians doing here? What can they ask for? Do they want now to inscribe their pathologic irregularity in the Charter of Human Rights? Are they claiming the pathetic 'right' to boast about their sexual aberration? This unawareness of their illness just proves how severe these clinical cases are....They have discredited this Conference and distorted the true purposes of woman's emancipation." Thus, Pedro Gringoire in *Excelsior* (July 1, 1975), the largest circulation newspaper in Mexico, denounced those demanding that lesbianism be included on the agenda at the first United Nations World Conference on Women.

Lesbians have been asserting our fundamental human rights as part of the women's rights agenda in the context of the United Nations World Conferences on Women since their inception in Mexico City in 1975 when the first International Women's Year Conference led to the declaration of a UN Decade for Women (1976-1985). The UN Decade and its

world conferences did not create either feminism or lesbian activism, and many of their official proponents have been hostile to both. Nevertheless, they have provided a world-wide public focus on women which legitimized women's activities and sponsored events where women have expanded their international networking and developed greater political savvy. Likewise, women's movements in every region have been both fearful and hesitant about lesbianism. Yet, at the same time, they have provided the theoretical and organizational context for lesbians to become more visible and to challenge homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality as antithetical to the goals of feminism.

Claudia Hinojosa, one of the early lesbian feminist activists in Mexico City, has observed that the emergence of lesbianism at the 1975 conference took everyone by surprise. Yet, she says, it became the frame for the first significant exchange between Mexican lesbians and organized lesbian feminists from other countries. Further while the UN Conference and the NGO (non-governmental organization) parallel event made no official pronouncements on the issue, the scandal that the press made over lesbianism gave it high visibility both in Mexico and among delegates at the conference. Within the NGO Tribune, impromptu lesbian workshops were scheduled which received a large response and also became the only space for discussion by women of their own sexuality of any kind.

At the 1980 mid-decade World Conference on Women in Copenhagen lesbian groups primarily from Western countries proposed six workshops for the parallel NGO Forum which were regularly scheduled and well attended. Some women from Third World countries who did not identify as lesbians also asked for information sessions on the topic, and several lively dialogues were added. But the controversies at this conference focused on the Middle East and on North-South divisions and not on lesbianism. Thus, lesbians moved from outrageous scandal in Mexico to low-key networking and dialogue in Copenhagen. While productive,

these sessions were perhaps too quiet as many never knew lesbianism was discussed at the Forum and the governmental conference was not even pushed to consider this as part of its agenda.

In 1985 as 15,000 women prepared to attend the end of the Decade World Conference on Women in Nairobi, rumors were rife that lesbians would not be given visas or allowed to speak at the Forum. Nevertheless lesbians from all regions came and on the first day, the Forum '85 newspaper confirmed "reports appearing in two Kenyan daily papers of the presence of lesbians at the NGO Forum." In spite of some initial misunderstandings, a number of scheduled workshops on lesbianism were successfully held. Further, in response to the visibility given to the issue by the media, an informal lesbian conversation spot on the lawn at the University of Nairobi's Great Court remained crowded most of the time, particularly with African women who came to ask questions.

The highlight was a Lesbian Press Conference held at the Forum where women from all regions spoke. A Third World lesbian statement sought to counter the idea that this was a white western issue declaring: "If it seems that lesbianism is confined to white western women, it is often because Third World lesbians and lesbians of color come up against more obstacles to our visibility...But this silence has to be seen as one more aspect of women's sexual repression and not as a conclusion that lesbianism doesn't concern us...The struggle for lesbian rights is indispensable to any struggle for basic human rights. It's part of the struggle of all women for control over our own lives."

At the inter-governmental conference in Nairobi, a Dutch delegate delivered a speech that included a call for defending lesbian rights, thus marking the first governmental mention of lesbians in the United Nations. While the conference took no action on the issue in 1985, this paved the way for declarations on lesbian rights presented at several of the regional preparatory conferences for the Fourth World Con-

ference on Women.

1995: LESBIAN RIGHTS ARE WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE  
HUMAN RIGHTS

Since the end of the UN Decade for Women in 1985, many women have organized to bring our perspectives into other UN activities and world conferences that are not woman specific. One of these has been the Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights developed around the concept that "women's rights are human rights." This campaign succeeded in putting women onto the agenda of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 and gained recognition of violence against women, whether it occurs in public or private, as a human rights violation. While some NGO activities in this campaign have included lesbian rights as women's/human rights, at the governmental level this was not accepted in Vienna. A year later, an effort to get respect for sexual rights on the Programme of Action from the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo also failed.

The growing acceptance of women's rights as human rights, however, should lead to progress on gaining an understanding of lesbian rights as human rights. At a minimum, if the women's human rights agenda is going to be inclusive of all women and not repeat the exclusionary approaches it has challenged in male-dominated human rights practice, this and many other "minority" women's rights issues must be vigorously pursued.

Women's rights and lesbian rights are linked in substantive ways. Both issues challenge how human rights distinctions between the private and public and reluctance to address female sexuality have perpetuated violations of women and kept them invisible. Further, the defense of lesbian rights is integral to the defense of all women's right to determine their own sexuality, to work at the jobs they prefer, and to live as they choose with women, men, children, or alone. Homophobia and fear of lesbianism is used to keep

women in line—accepting their society's assigned gender roles and limitations. When any woman curtails her freedom or fails to take an action or say what she believes out of fear of being labeled a lesbian, then homophobia has denied her independence and sapped her strength.

It is in this context of over two decades of lesbian and feminist struggle internationally that I welcome the publishing of this ground-breaking report. This book is both courageous and heartbreaking. Reading about how much isolation, violence, humiliation, and fear most lesbians still suffer throughout the world is painful. And after two decades of regional and world conferences where the abuses of lesbian human rights have been presented, it is shameful that so many women as well as men are still unwilling to defend the right of women to love other women.

Every person who upholds the right of women to human dignity and bodily integrity must ask why is this issue so difficult to support? Why after so many years does such profound prejudice, ignorance, and discrimination against women solely on the grounds of their sexual orientation continue to flourish? When there is much talk about support of the girl-child and positive self-esteem for women, how can the physical violence, psychological abuse, forced heterosexuality, and compulsory marriages inflicted on women of all ages who love other women continue to be condoned through the silence of the world community?

I have asked myself these questions repeatedly over the years. I had the relative privilege of "coming out" as a white middle-class, educated woman in the context of the feminist movement in the United States in 1971. My major fears were that I might lose my job or no longer be able to get visas and travel to other countries. I recall realizing the depth of the isolation that haunts the lives of many lesbians later that year when I was in Tokyo for a meeting of an international student organization and I slipped away to go to a bar for "deviants" (lesbians, gays, and heterosexual couples

having extra-marital affairs). As I earnestly struggled through a gay male interpreter to explain the ideas of our newly formed lesbian-feminist collective in Washington D.C. to a bar hostess dressed in an impeccable pin striped suit, she kept asking over and over if there really are women in my country who "love only women." Her astonishment that there were women like her elsewhere was so great that she could not get past that question, compelling me to see the isolation that she felt even in that bar.

This book reminds me once again that while a few of us have found a niche in this homophobic and misogynist world, the lives of most lesbians remain isolated, invisible, and precarious. Yet, the very existence of this book is also testament to the courage, strength, and vision of growing numbers of lesbians who dare to write such essays and to organize groups in spite of the repression they face. While each of us faces different constraints and fears, accepting our identity as lesbians and "coming out" in at least some ways is an empowering experience. The "coming out" process is gradual and ongoing because the world assumes heterosexuality at every turn. No matter how many times one discloses one's sexual orientation, there are always new places and people and times when one must decide again how far "out" to be.

The sense of integration and freedom from hiding that comes with affirming who one is and sharing that with others—whether family, friends, or colleagues at work—is also an energizing force. As the authors of the South Africa report in this book note, many lesbians who are "influenced by their own experiences of oppression are in the vanguard of movements for progressive societal change in numbers far outweighing their proportion of the population." Such lesbian and gay male energy in the human rights coalition against apartheid in South Africa resulted in that country being the first to offer protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in its new constitution.

Lesbians, both in and out of the "closet," are vital partici-