



LezzQuattro
Team for Lesbian Counseling & Education
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for Female Oxygen
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1. What is the general attitude towards lesbians in Serbia and outside the cities?
Please give specific examples of homophobia.

LESBIAN LIVES FROM SERBIA 2012 – stories

** Lesbian, 17 years, from a little town in central part of Serbia, aware and proud of being lesbian, but living with conservative and controlling parents (her father is a police officer). She is surviving a lot of discrimination only because of her appearance. There aren't any out lesbians in her town, so she feels very lonely. She doesn't have a PC, so connection with lesbian community through internet is impossible. Even if there is an internet café in her place, she is afraid that somebody can see over her shoulders in the café that she is on lesbian chat, and discover her lesbian identity, so she is not using the internet café for chatting, like many other young girls in small towns, where everybody knows everybody else. She gets in touch with one of us from Belgrade, via friends from that town, but it is difficult to support her. She has no money to travel to Belgrade.*

** Lesbian, 22 years, studying in University of Nis, town in south Serbia, currently living with her girlfriend in a rented apartment. Her parents are paying for her studying. She tested her parents when she thought of coming out and spoke friendly about one of her gay friend in front of them. After that she realized that her parents are homophobic, they even think that AIDS exists because of gays. She gave up the idea of coming out, because she is afraid that her parents might stop paying tuition and make her return to her hometown if they realize she is a lesbian. Whenever her parents visit her, she hides books, posters and leaflets with lesbian topics.*

** Lesbian 28, from a small town. She left her parents from village eight years ago. She never had chance to go to university, because there was no money for that, so she is working now in a café in a bigger town Nis. Her salary is 140EUR a month. With this money she lives all month. With friends she rents a flat, so three of them are sharing two rooms that cost her 60EUR for a rent, the rest she uses for cigarettes, drinks and food, hardly anything rests for clothes. She is proud that she is autonomous from her parents, and she is connected to a woman's activist group in her town.*

** Lesbian, 68 years, lives in a small town with her husband in the same village house, exposed to everyday pressures that she has to be more feminine, more mother, wife and grandmother. She has never been involved in a love relationship with women, she didn't have a chance, but she loves women all her life. She is in the serious bad health condition and can't move a lot from her home. She has friends in Belgrade from Labris lesbian group and she calls them from time to time, they call her Hello our dear Lesbian, she loves to hear that, that is when she lives fullest.*

** Young lesbian from Belgrade, 19 years a student of sociology who recently came out to her parents, was after that exposed to several physical attacks from her father. When she reported it to the police, their*

answer was that she is ungrateful daughter. Her mother is a noticeable medical doctor, so she engaged a special police officer who followed her, and who came to a flat of her friends and a lover, and threaten her several times. She lives in a constant fear, still in the house of her parents.

*Lesbian, 18 year, Novi Sad, left home after her mother discover she is lesbian by hiring detective to follow her. After few days she returned to parents home to talk to them. Both, mother and father beat her heavily and after she could not leave bed for three days...than she lost all her hair due to stress. She didn't leave home next 6 months. Parents ordered that she could be visited only by boys.

*Bisexual women from Novi Sad, 40 years, lives with a husband and three children, engage in secret love relationship with women for two years. They are planning a life together, but she is afraid to come out to her husband with whom she has no loner sexual relation, because she is in fear of rejection by her children, and in the fear that her husband will take their children away.

2. What is the background in Serbia for homophobia as you see it?

Feminist lesbian activism in the Balkan

Lesbian activism in the Balkan region started in the late eighties with development of feminist movement in Yugoslavia, and ever since has been slowly growing. In the First Yugoslav Feminist Meeting in Ljubljana in 1987, lesbians have gathered for the first time and decided to spread lesbian solidarity, which is still the case. In 1991 the war started and new values of militarism and nationalism became dominant references, while social movements and liberties were halted in Serbia as well in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Croatia. Feminist lesbians have cherished politics of solidarity and in 1997 the Lesbian Weeks of lesbians from the region have started to grow, last gathering of this sort brought about 50 lesbians from five countries in May 2011 in Belgrade.



Lesbians LezzQuattro and friends, Belgrade 2011.

In Serbia, there are two lesbian organizations working continuously and advocating for lesbian rights: Labris organization for lesbian human rights <http://www.labris.org.rs/> established in 1995 in Belgrade and NLO (Novosadska lezbejska organizacija) 2004 in Novi Sad www.n-l-o.org.

Pride parade situation in Serbia

The history of Lesbian and Gay Pride Parade starts in 2001 with so called 'massacre parade' that meant about 800 ultra nationalist violent young men who came to beat up the participants who were without any protection. After that, in 2009 the state banned the Pride Day that was already announced and organised for five months, in 2010 the Pride Day is organised with about 500 activists, 4,000 policemen and 4,000 ultranationalist violent men guided by political parties and church¹. It was a very difficult situation given two separate spaces, for activists protected by police, and other full of violence.² In 2011 the state again banned the Pride Parade in Belgrade. These events brought many dilemmas in the LGBT movement: pro and contra Pride Parades in Serbia.



Photo: Pride walk Belgrade 2010: Lesbian and gay activists were protected by 4000 policemen, and were kept in the space in town free of citizens and fascist mobs. On the other side of police cordons there were 4000 fascist mobs 'ready-to-kill' and were destroying street shop windows and other items. Upper photo the slogan WE CAN BE TOGETHER, and one LezzQuattro activists on the first row in pink pants, Lepa Mladjenovic, a lesbian spokesperson.



Photo under: policemen in Belgrade in the same time while the Pride walk was taking place!

Discrimination and violence

Serbia passed the Law against Discrimination in 2009 which includes the LGBT population, which is a big success for the LGBT community. Also there is a law on hate speech, but yet no case that has been completed. According to legal matters there are still many things to be done: still there is no possibility of any legal formalization of same-sex partnerships and families.

¹ <http://www.anegdote.com/blog/belgrade-pride-redux>

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/oct/10/serbia-police-rioters-gay-pride>

According to recently conducted research, very high percent of citizens still believe that homosexuality is disorder³, and in spite of the fact that homosexuality is in numerous countries during 90's removed from the list of disorders, in our country it is officially removed in 2008 year⁴ including existing of several laws which *explicité* incriminate discrimination on the base of sexual orientation.

Discrimination, as well as different forms of violence, in the first place physical and psychical, is deeply immersed in the ground of the society and sustainable as mechanisms of homophobia (in public space as well as in private life) and they are part of everyday life of LGBT people in Serbia. In family, situation is not better: even 17% of parents would react with violence to the fact that their children might be lesbian or homosexuals.⁵

How much is homophobia actually structural form of discrimination (which do not exclude existence of very hostile direct individual discrimination, but also institutional discrimination toward lesbians and gays) speaks the fact that almost half people in Serbia would exclude their close family members if they would find out that they are same sex orientation, respectively the same number of people never would except that truth.⁶ As the UNDP study on human development from 2010⁷ shows increasing tendency of intolerance towards minority groups in Serbia. The conclusion of this study is that the intolerance in Serbia is specifically grown to LGBT compared to other discriminated minority groups (for example 40% of respondents in research said that they are against LGBT neighbors, etc).

Health

Despite the systematic training that organizations such as Labris and Incest Trauma Center are offering, there is still health workers homophobia that is reported by LGBT community. Special needs of LGBT population are not recognized in any specific category of health such as for example gynecology or psychiatry. The positive news is that some health-workers in Belgrade are supportive.

The position of lesbians within the LGBT community

Although the entire LGBT population is discriminated, lesbians are twice as discriminated: as women and as lesbians. Roma lesbians, lesbians with disabilities and trans people are particularly in a difficult situation within the LGBT community: to be accepted as they are. The highest hate language is against Roma women, and lesbians are not visible in their community.

3. The lesbian women in the countryside who live with their parents and don't have so many possibilities - are they out or not?

How do you get in touch with them?

The reality is that situation for lesbians in the places away from big cities are, we could say, in 'catastrophic situation'. Lesbians could not be out in small towns due to homophobia. They would not be able to survive living as out lesbian in villages and small towns in Serbia. Those who dare to be out are brought to psychiatrists by their parents without their will, forced to have relationship with

3 67% of examinees presented this attitude. See more: Research – Prejudices on the light, GSA 2010, pp 8

4 Advocating of LGBT organizations, particularly Labris, organizations for lesbian human rights, psychiatry section of Serbian doctor society is officially confirm that "same sex orientation in accurate ICD – 10 Classification of mind disorders and behavior disorders is not mention as disorder" see: annual report of position of LGBTTQI population in Serbia for 2008. Labris, organization for lesbian human rights, Belgrade, pp 20

5 See more: Research – Prejudices on light, GSA, 2010, pp 15

6 Ibid, pp 8

7 Human Development Study - UNDP Serbia 2010

<http://www.undp.org.rs/index.cfm?event=public.publicationsDetails&revid=A2A5326B-EBE2-E26B-4B5BCDEB53A1214A>

boys/men, or forced to change their self-image/style. So most young women to be lesbians choose to move from parents' home and start living and working or - if possible - studying in bigger cities. Big cities give some or better opportunity of being anonymous and also better ways to create safer social networks (to meet other lesbians and gays, to date, to go to clubs and have fun, enlarge possibilities to find job, rent a room, find roommates/flatmates, etc). Some lesbians remain silent about their existence, but situation for young girls and women comparing to older ones is – changing and they are trying to use opportunities by using the internet and migrating. From smaller towns, lesbians have support in Novi Sad with NLO lesbians group, and in Nis, feminist group Women's Space with a strong lesbian leadership. In all other towns there are not lesbian support groups. And this two groups are big success of long term feminist activism.

Financial support from Female Oxygen

Therefore we, as LezzQuattro commit ourselves to care for lesbians in small places and villages in supporting their lives as well in different ways then only counseling. The financial support will be used for empowering them:

- a. For the bus tickets and hostel accommodation to come to lesbian festival in Novi Sad in September 2012.
- b. For the bus tickets and hostel accommodation to come to lesbian workshops in Belgrade in June and July 2012.
- c. For the SOS phone and e-mail counseling.

General aim is to use the collected fund from Female Oxygen in order to improve lives of lesbians from countryside and small towns in Serbia in line with our basic aims of work

4. Concerning the project - what do you hope the women will gain from an event in Belgrade - will it be the beginning of something and not just a "one-day event"⁸?

What are the results of LezQuattro's work - are attitudes changing?

LezzQuattro team is mobile in its work which means that we have good network cooperation. LezzQuattro team started activities in in 2001 - the workshops and individual counseling, and LEZZ SOS Hotline will start in June 2012.

LezzQuattro - The Team for Lesbian Counseling & Education has two major passions:

- Emotional empowerment of lesbians and bisexual women in all parts of Serbia by inspiring their process of self-growth, encouragement, self-consciousness to overcome interiorized homophobia, sexism and psychological consequences of multiple discrimination, to be able to take an active role in their lives and in the society and to achieve their basic human rights.

- Developing knowledge and practice of lesbian counseling by developing standards, principles, values and skills of counseling and emotional literacy and spreading them among counselors and professionals and citizens in Serbia and Balkan region.

In the past 4 months eight different lesbian workshops have been organized with approximately 10 to 16 lesbians, altogether more than 40 lesbians participated. This is a big number for our community. We follow the change in lesbians through evaluations and motivation for participation. The change is also seen as lesbians feel 'more free', accepting oneself more than before', some of them 'came out to their most closest families and friends', some of them 'feel they are not alone', and that 'this is a place where we are fully accepted'. We believe in power of growth through the safe space created by women with similar experience - therefore we will continue with lesbian-only workshops

The festivals are carried out by NLO Novi Sad Lesbians Organization in September. LezzQuattro activists are also engaged in the organizing of this event.

⁸ 'one shot thing' we as feminists would not use this term as it is militaristic origin. Thank you for understanding.

5. What does EU mean for Serbia - now you are a candidate country - can this anyway improve gay people's situation?

Granting Serbia EU candidate status in the beginning of March 2012 after years of waiting is an important step for the country and its reform efforts. But there is still a long way to go until Serbia reaches EU membership. Our first hope is that EU membership will put an end to war in the region. There is still warlike energies with the ultra-right political wing. As well, adoption of the Law on prohibition of discrimination in 2009 was a milestone for LGBT community, and we waited eight years for its normative regulation. In this sense, the process of EU integration for us is an important process because it represents attempt to balance between economic growth, human rights and social justice. We are well aware that LGBT population has fewer opportunities for social justice, especially when it comes to multiple discrimination. There are many problems to deal with in order to improve inclusion of LGBT as citizens in institutional setting and development processes. Poverty, corruption and legacy of nationalism (hatred toward Others) are one of toughest to be deconstructed in this process.

For lesbians in Serbia, EU membership is an important hope step.

6. Do you have a digital photo of your group or as an illustration of your work or the lesbian scene in Serbia - which we might use for press release? Or a logo maybe.



LezzQuattro and friends: Queer Picnic organized instantly in one evening by one of the LezzQuattro activist, Suncica Vucaj in 2011 after the Pride Belgrade was banned by the Ministry of Police. The park is in the center of town.