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Lesbians: THE INVISIBLE TORMUT

By Susan Hawthorne

There are small changes afoot in laws referring to asylum for gays. But it remains inordinately difficult to find examples that apply to lesbians. Four years ago, I began researching the literature on the torture of lesbians. I was confounded by a severe lack of research.

The countries in which the torture of lesbians takes place adhere to very different political forms ranging from socialist to fascist, from secular to fundamentalist. Lesbians are tortured in families, in prisons and in mental asylums. A lesbian may call out to others in her pain, but she cannot be heard because no one is listening. Few dare to listen. Almost no one speaks out. Almost no one cares about her torture.

The breaking of the silencing of lesbians as a group has to be accompanied by stopping the silencing of lesbians who have been tortured physically and psychically, as well as socially and politically.

Tina Machida is a Zimbabwean lesbian who now lives in Harare. Her persistent rape took place in the mid-1980s at the hands of her parents, in an effort to “cure” her of her lesbian existence. Every day they brought in a man who raped her, and this continued until she was pregnant.¹

In nearby Uganda, according to Amnesty International, Christine and Norah, along with three gay male activists, were tortured by military police in 1999. Uganda’s political color is left, but President Yoweri Museveni, like Mugabe in Zimbabwe, has no concern about lesbian and gay rights. Lesbians and gays are considered “less than human.” And in Namibia, Home Affairs Minister Jerry Ekandjo urged police to “eliminate” lesbians and gay men “from the face of Namibia.” In Zambia, lesbian and gay activist organizations are illegal.³

Christine from Uganda was blindfolded, taken to a secret detention center and interrogated. The interrogators were interested in why she wasn’t married and why she was engaged in political activism around sexuality. Later, three male detainees raped her. Her friend Norah was taken to a different place—a military barracks. She was beaten and sexually abused. She was also accused of denying the men what was “rightfully theirs”—that is, access to her body.

I want to emphasize the fact that torture of lesbians continues, because many individuals believe that lesbians no longer suffer the pain, humiliation and shame of systematic discrimination, let alone torture.

In many countries it is not unusual for lesbian existence to be equated with psychiatric disorders. In countries where lesbianism remains categorized as a mental disorder, lesbians are subjected to inhuman “treatments” and long incarceration. It is a particular way in which families deal with unruly young women.

All Pitcherskaia, a lesbian from Russia, was charged with “hooliganism.” Long-term forced institutionalization can be the ultimate result for many young women, and as in Alla Pitcherskaia’s case, her girlfriend was also “forcibly held in a psychiatric institution.” Alla Pitcherskaia’s crime consisted of continuing to work with a lesbian youth organization.

Western countries are not immune to such abuses. Female prisoners everywhere, no matter what the reason for their incarceration, are likely to be subjected to torture and abuse. Lesbian prisoners, especially those who find themselves in the same institutions as men or guarded by men, are at an increased risk of torture and bad treatment because they break the rules of how women are supposed to behave. Indeed, lesbians are likely to be targeted simply because of their sexual orientation—because they are lesbians. As a result, they are criminalized.

In Chile after the 1973 coup, lesbians were tortured. Consuelo Rivera-Fuentes’ story of this time, written with her
partner, Linda Birke, is one of the most important documents of what happens to a lesbian who is tortured. Together they explore the psychic and physical traumas that ensue, and delve into the consequences of torture on the human body. “The pain... all this pain here and there, down there in my vagina... the agony... where am I? Where is my I?” (italics and ellipses in the original).4

There are many countries where being a lesbian carries an immediate jail sentence: places like Algeria, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Morocco, Tunisia, the Bahamas, Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Oman and Romania. Persecution, however, extends to countries where theoretically, to be a lesbian is not an infringement of the law, but in reality, it remains so. This is the case in Colombia, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka, and Brazil. In others, such as Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iran, Kuwait, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Chechen Republic, Sudan, Taiwan and Yemen, death is the penalty.4 In Iran the methods of execution are cruel and painful—“hanging, stoning, being thrown off a cliff or high building, or facing a firing squad.”5 Other reports indicate that lesbians “have been beheaded or stoned to death.”6 Under fundamentalist regimes, the torture of lesbians can even be justified on the basis that the man is doing his sacred duty. It is also difficult to ascribe the word “torture” to heterosexual rape when it is regarded as so normal. In fact, it is the quintessential form of torture used against lesbians.

If lesbians remain outside the scope of social justice reform, then everyone’s civil and political rights remain in jeopardy. The most difficult political reforms to make are, in the long run, the most important because they give us a clue as to the limits of our preparedness to live an ethical existence. If one is unable to fear for the lives and wellbeing of those who are most different, then one is incapable of defending justice for all—even at the most basic level, such as freedom of association, freedom to love. ☺

Endnotes:  

6 Ibid, page 12.

Note: I am grateful to a lesbian in Uganda who may prefer to remain anonymous, who drew my attention to the injustices against lesbians in 2002; to Consuelo Rivera-Fuentes and Linda Burke, whose article I stumbled across soon afterwards; to the anonymous researchers at Amnesty International whose reports on the torture of lesbians provide so much of the firsthand material; and to Lara Fergus, who sent me the Crimes of Hate document from Amnesty; to Monika Reinfelder, whose book Amazon to Zami contains some of the other firsthand accounts; and to an unnamed friend with whom I discussed at length her experience of torture. I thank her for her time and generosity in sharing what was an extremely painful experience.

A longer version of this article appears as “Ancient Hatred and Its Contemporary Manifestation: The Torture of Lesbians” in The Journal of Hate Studies, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2005/06 pp. 33-58.