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COMBATING SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (LGBT) are subjected to particular discrimination almost everywhere: in more than eighty states homosexuality (often understood exclusively as same-sex orientation among men) is prohibited under criminal law, and in seven Islamic countries it may even be punishable by death. Often the very existence of homosexuality is denied, or it is defined as a disease that must be combated. But even in those areas, such as Europe, where legal discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation has been abolished, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people do not receive equal treatment in all matters and are not accepted in all spheres of life.

In December 2008, a UN General Assembly debate—the first of its kind—showed how deeply divided the international community is. While sixty-six countries, mainly from Europe and Latin America, supported a declaration on the decriminalization of homosexuality, almost sixty others—the majority of them strongly influenced by Catholicism or Islam—backed a counter-declaration issued by the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

However, even in the countries where homosexuality is subject to prosecution and is aggressively rejected by the general public, LGBT activists are joining forces to educate the public and demand their rights. In many cases, that calls for great courage and a willingness to put themselves at personal risk. The Heinrich Böll Foundation stands shoulder to shoulder with the LGBT communities' campaigns in many countries—often we are the only foreign organization to support the activities and networks that challenge discrimination and persecution. ■

SOUTH AFRICA

Progressive constitution, conservative population

The 1996 South African Constitution is praised across the world for its prohibition on all discrimination based on sexual orientation. In 2006, in the face of strong opposition, an additional law was passed that allows marriage between two men or two women. However, a study by the Human Sciences Research Council published in November 2008 shows that the great majority of South Africans still believe sex between women or between men is unacceptable and “un-African.” That results in hate crimes, even murders, against homosexual men and women. The women of the Coalition of African Lesbians, one of the Heinrich Böll Foundation's partner organizations, also report cases of so-called “corrective rape”—based on the idea that a woman can be “cured” of her “disease” by sex with a man.

OUT LGBT Well-being, an organization of and for LGBT communities, describes South African society as conservative, patriarchal, heteronormative, and prejudiced against homosexuals. That's why OUT runs a telephone hotline and a small clinic of its own to provide medical and psychological assistance in Tshwane (Pretoria). As well as this care for individuals, OUT sets up meeting points and supports community formation. The organi-

zation has also begun collaboration with the province's Department of Social Services, with the specific aim of mainstreaming LGBT interests as a cross-disciplinary theme throughout the social services, and especially in the area of psychosocial emergency services. Because academic research has also neglected LGBT concerns, OUT carries out its own research projects, some of them undertaken jointly with leading national and international organizations. The Heinrich Böll Foundation supports the “Advocacy and Mainstreaming Programme” run by OUT, which lobbies for further change in society and aims to lessen prejudices through information and training. OUT not only aims to organize the LGBT communities and help them exercise their rights; it also seeks to build new coalitions with other social movements and human rights organizations. To a great extent, says Antonie Nord, the director of the Foundation's office in Cape Town, feminist groups and LGBT groups are still working in isolation from each other.

Whereas OUT is mainly restricted to South Africa, the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL), founded in 2003, brings together nineteen organizations from eleven African countries. CAL has a radical feminist philosophy, and has set itself the goal of changing Africa so that lesbian women can live their way of life publicly with equal rights in all areas. Fikile Vilakazi, CAL's director, wishes every woman the necessary “boldness, strength and courage to challenge, question and demand answers” on “prejudice, inequality, stigmatization, hate crimes and marginalization against sexual minorities.” The Heinrich Böll Foundation also supports CAL in its work to attain official observer status at the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR).



Parliamentary elections in South Africa, 2004

In view of the living conditions in many South African townships, where house is crowded against house, shack against shack, homosexual women and men have only limited opportunities for privacy. This is why the Heinrich Böll Foundation provides support for Cape Town's “Triangle Project,” which aims to create spaces of retreat. The organization runs a drop-in center in the Mowbray neighborhood. The urgent necessity of such projects is shown not only by the “corrective rapes” but by murders of lesbian women. In 2006 in Guguletu (Cape Town), nineteen-year-old Zoliswa Nkonana was stoned, then killed with a golf club. In July 2007, in Meadowlands, near Johannesburg, Sizakele Sigasa

and Salome Masooa were killed execution style; ten months later, the lesbian footballer Eudy Simelane was gang-raped, then murdered, in Kwathema.

Marlow Valentine of the Triangle Project points out that all the murdered women were black. "LGBT people who live in urban and better-off neighborhoods are closing their eyes to what's happening to us. Many reassure themselves with the fact that we have a great Constitution and laws. Class, privilege, status, skin color, gender—all of these factors influence what moves and affects us."

www.cal.org.za

www.out.org.za

Homosexuality in Africa



In thirty-eight African countries, homosexuality is expressly forbidden; it is legal (or simply not mentioned in the legislation) in at least thirteen countries. In Mauritania, Sudan, and the northern federal states of Nigeria, homosexuality may be punished by death. In Uganda life sentences can be imposed, and in the Gambia, Kenya, and Tanzania, sentences can reach fourteen years. In Zimbabwe, even a public demonstration of affection between people of the same sex is a criminal offence. Only South Africa has a Constitution that explicitly prohibits discrimination against lesbians and gay men. It is the only country in Africa that allows marriage between people of the same sex.

THAILAND

Pride and prejudice: queering gender justice

Thailand is high up the list of destinations for lesbian, transgender, and gay travelers. It is one of the few countries where you can feel safe from physical or verbal attacks—at least from the Thai people; it is one of those countries where a woman can usually travel alone without problems. The diversity of genders and sexualities is more obvious in Thailand than other places. Here it is not just "hetero" and "homo," "women" and "men," but toms, dees, bisexuals, gays, gay kings, gay queens, kathoey (transsexual and transgender women), lesbians, and men or women who have sex with people of the same gender without defining themselves as different.

At first glance, from the outside, the "Land of the Free" seems to live up to its name, but unfortunately the reality of everyday life is often very different: more homophobic and transphobic. Thailand is not a paradise among human societies. "The first thing I stole in my life was a gay magazine," said twenty-six-year-old Jay in a Bangkok Post article about a Thai Queer Resource Center media project supported by the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

"I stole it out of curiosity, and out of fear that people would think I was gay if I simply walked up and bought it." Gay magazines are viewed with distrust by society and the authorities, and fall under a generalized suspicion of being pornography. Yet they play an important role in education about HIV/AIDS and in raising awareness that being "different" in terms of sex or gender does not mean you are alone.

This project arose out of discussion events with representatives of lesbian/gay/trans/queer movements that—for example in the debate on the new Constitution in 2007—were much more visible than the country's women's movement, at that time in a state of paralysis. In the complex reality covering vastly different lifestyles, private and societal spaces, and ambivalences, it is difficult to work out where to begin in addressing discrimination, stereotyping, homophobia, and transphobia.

Neither wrong nor alone

In Turkey, homosexuality has never been banned or criminalized. But neither have there been any laws that protect lesbians, gay men, transvestites, bisexuals, or transsexuals from discrimination and hostility—for example by mayors and governors who are eager to ban LGBT organizations or have them dissolved for the crime of "offending public decency." In January 2009, the latest ban, directed against Lambda in Istanbul, was pronounced unlawful by the Supreme Court. The four LGBT organizations and the Gay Pride parades held since 1994 have made homosexuals more visible—but, of course, also easier to attack. Police harassment and violence are everyday events. According to the Lambda study "Neither Wrong nor Alone," published in 2005, 87% of the 393 gay, lesbian, and bisexual respondents had experienced verbal attacks, marginalization, and isolation. In 2008 the murder of Ahmet Yıldız hit the headlines—a crime that was probably committed by the young man's family and was thus labeled the first honor killing of a gay man to come to public attention.

www.lambdaistanbul.org

www.kaosgl.org

GEORGIA

"Me" magazine and the "Inclusive" foundation

Since fall 2007, the Heinrich Böll Foundation has been supporting Inclusive, the first NGO in Georgia to stand up explicitly for the rights of sexual minorities. The Inclusive foundation documents rights violations, researching, and publishing on the situation of sexual minorities in Georgia. It offers counseling to individuals and groups, and runs information events. In the first half of 2008 alone, it ran twenty events: discussions, film screenings, and the women's club. An average of around thirty people came along, 60% of them women. At the film screenings, numbers even reached forty or fifty.

By supporting the magazine *Me*, published by Inclusive, the Heinrich Böll Foundation aims to contribute to challenging traditional gender stereotypes in Georgia's public discourse and to counter the homophobia that is expressed—sometimes aggressively—in politics and much of the media. In a survey of values and attitudes, 80% of the respondents made it very clear that they did not want to have a homosexual as a neighbor.

The magazine, which has appeared bilingually in English and Georgian four times a year since 2008, has built up a very

good reputation in Tbilisi in just a short time. In 2008, more than 2,500 copies were downloaded.

www.inclusive-foundation.org



Me—Georgia's first LGBT magazine

LEBANON

Courage against the majority

"What has happened to the days of homoeroticism when Arabia's cafés were full of male belly-dancers, and poets like Abu Nuwas wrote love poems to beautiful young men?" Lebanese Georges Azzi would like to reach a point where gay men are not simply silently tolerated, but positively accepted by society. That is his dream, and in its pursuit he, along with other members of Club Free, founded Helem, which is the Arabic word for "dream" and also the acronym for "Lebanese Protection for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders."

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"The fact that Helem was formed in Beirut is hardly surprising," says Layla Al-Zubaidi, who runs the Middle East office. "The city has always been well-known for its relatively open atmosphere and the coexistence of different lifestyles." As well as the Helem Community Center in the inner-city neighborhood of Sanayeh, which welcomes 700 to 800 visitors a month, there are more than a dozen meeting-points for gay men, venues that are more or less obvious to the casual observer.

But these hesitant beginnings of tolerance are not shared by many Lebanese—whether Christians or Muslims—and it rests on a precarious balance. "There are two societies in Lebanon," say the activists at Helem, "the conservative one and the liberal one. Many politicians stand in the center and fear the reaction of the conservatives to a social hot potato like homosexuality. Yes, homosexuals exist, but let's treat that as a taboo and not talk about it." Again and again, too, there are attacks by passers-by and the police.

Helem's main objective is to abolish Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which penalizes "unnatural sexual intercourse." To gain more momentum and legitimacy for this goal, it is consciously seeking out alliances with other Lebanese civil society organizations, which are only accepting the topic with some reluctance. Helem works toward other social-policy objectives as well: in 2003 the organization took part in the movement of opposition to the Iraq War, and in 2006 it coordinated emergency assistance for refugees from the south, many of whom support Hezbollah. The crisis situation created points of contact that would otherwise have been unlikely to arise.



Lesbians and queer women write about their lives

Helem also acts on HIV/AIDS, offering free testing appointments via its office. When, in June 2006, the UN General Assembly held a special session on HIV/AIDS, Helem submitted a "shadow report" on behalf of the LGBT community in which it pointed out that the difficult position of homosexuals in Lebanese society contributes to the difficulty of negotiating safer sex. The 2005 meeting with the CEDAW Committee in New York was disappointing. The Committee could not bring itself to include a call for the abolition of Article 534 in its list of recommendations for the Lebanese government. But Helem, with its strong international networks, knocked at CEDAW's door again in 2008, this time with a shadow report on violence against lesbians.

Every year, the International Day Against Homophobia sees concerted action by Helem: flyers and posters are distributed, podium debates arranged, lectures held on the image of homosexuals in the media, and documentaries screened. Helem also publishes a newsletter, alternately in English and in Arabic, and a bilingual magazine, Barra. In 2006, with Heinrich Böll Foundation support, the first Arabic-language book on homophobia

appeared. Its varied contributions carried the clear message that it is not the homosexuals who are the problem, but the society that refuses them their fundamental rights. In 2009, the Foundation co-funded another publication, *Myths on Homosexuality*, which appeared not only in English and Arabic but, for the first time, also in Armenian, so as to reach Lebanon's Armenian minority. February 23, 2009, saw another milestone: the first sit-in against violence against minorities, held on Sodeco Square. For the 200 participants, it was a moment to celebrate when they held their banners high: "We shall no longer be afraid."



Barra magazine's special issue on homophobia

Helem fights for the recognition of all LGBT communities; in a society where women do not even have the right to make decisions on their own sexuality, however, commitment to lesbian issues has been primarily a feminist preserve. To fill the gap, in August 2007 four women established Meem (A Community of Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning Women and Transgender Persons in Lebanon). Its aim was to create a "safe space" in Lebanon where non-heterosexual girls and women could meet, share their experiences, and discuss ideas. Meem now has almost 300 members, and its Womyn House provides that safe space. A very lively website with 6,000 visitors every month, a monthly newsletter, and the quarterly magazine *Bekhsoos* show how attractive this group is and the great vitality of what is still a relatively new forum.

www.meemgroup.org

www.helem.net

ISRAEL

We exist!

Anyone searching the Internet for Israeli Arab women who love women will soon stumble on the homepage of ASWAT, and be welcomed with the words "We exist" before receiving detailed information material. To be an Arab woman in Israel and to be a lesbian means finding yourself on the receiving end of three forms of discrimination at once. If women with this orientation show themselves in public—as ASWAT did in March 2007 with the announcement of its conference—they may encounter hate-filled reactions. Press releases by the Islamic Movement referred to a "cancer" that must be prevented from spreading in Arab society and that "should be eliminated from the Arab culture."

The conference took place regardless, in the Cinematheque Auditorium in the Jewish section of Haifa. Outside the venue, there was a demonstration by Knesset member Abbas Zakour and two dozen women wearing headscarves and long, loose robes. Their message was: "God, we ask you to guide these lesbians to the true path." Inside, the fifth anniversary of ASWAT ("Voices") was celebrated and the first ASWAT book in Arabic ("Home and Exile in Queer Experience") was presented.

The ASWAT women disseminate information, and also offer empowerment courses to develop self-confidence, a phone support line, a crisis intervention fund for women, an email distribution list, and a library. They have built up good links with similar groups outside Israel. In 2008 they were the first recipients of the "Go Visible" prize donated by Ulrike Lunacek, a Green Party member of the Austrian National Assembly.

www.aswatgroup.org



Jerusalem, June 26, 2008: Gay Pride parade with over 3,000 participants and heavy police protection



Beginnings of tolerance in Lebanon