

Kyrgyz Come Out

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Homophobia is rife in Kyrgyzstan with gay women particularly susceptible to discrimination.

It was an unpleasant incident at a Bishkek cafe that helped convince Sasha Kim that Kyrgyz lesbians had been silent for too long.

She was among several women ordered out of the cafe when two of their number were spotted by the other patrons exchanging a kiss. They were told the restaurant was a “respectable establishment” and no place for gays and lesbians.

The confrontation infuriated Kim and sparked the creation of Labris – an activist group for lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people. It is the first of its kind in Central Asia, telling lesbians about their rights, offering training sessions, showing films and simply offering support.

“After this incident, when we were thrown out of the cafe like dogs, we decided to gather together and create an organisation which could protect our rights, the rights of lesbians,” said Kim, a fifth-year university student.

In this conservative country, the women of Labris say they face discrimination on all fronts – at home, at work and at university.

Kim, who is studying law, was threatened with expulsion from her university if she defended the dissertation she’d written on the problems of legal regulation of sexual minorities in Kyrgyzstan.

“I had to write another paper in one night,” she said, adding attitudes towards lesbians have remained unchanged since the March revolution.

“Our problems were ignored by the government in the past, and it continues to ignore them. But we are not unhappy about this. The most important thing is that they do not hinder us. We don’t expect anything from them and do not link any of our hopes with them.”

Sveta, another Labris leader, was recently refused a job, because she is gay.

“They said that I could ruin the image of the organisation,” said Sveta who asked her real name not be used. “Although I was an ideal candidate for this position, I was not employed in this job.

“The worst thing is that we do not even have the right to take them to court, because according to our legislation, this is only possible if a person was discriminated against because of their gender, nationality or age, but the reason of belonging to a sexual minority is not included.”

Other Labris members, particularly those sporting short hair or masculine clothes, tell of open hostility and their fear of homophobic attacks.

“We are called the most indecent words on the street,” said Vika. “Over the last half year, if I am not mistaken, there have already been three cases when girls were beaten on the street.”

The women insist it is useless to complain to the police, many of whom have little sympathy for homosexuals.

At a May round-table discussion to mark International Day Against Homophobia, one invited representative of the internal affairs ministry said he would beat up a gay couple if he saw them holding hands in public.

A representative of the Ombudsman’s office was more sympathetic, however, telling the assembled NGOs, human rights activists and government envoys that homosexuals are part of society and their rights should be protected. A delegate from the OSCE pointed out that Kyrgyzstan had signed numerous international conventions that required it to fight discrimination and abuses of human rights.

One of the most serious problems faced by gay women – but one that seminars and legislation is unlikely to address – is the reaction of family members to news of a homosexual daughter, sister or mother in their midst.

Many like Sasha Kim’s mother will never accept a gay family member.

“I remember that terrible day as if it had just happened,” said Kim, describing the conversation in which she came out to her mother. “My mother started shouting at me and crying violently. I will never forget her words, ‘Better you had been a prostitute or drug addict than a lesbian’.”

Kim left home and eventually made gay friends, relieving the terrible loneliness that she had felt since first realising in high school that she was attracted to women. However, her own family still refuse to accept her “defect”, she said.

“Now I occasionally visit my home. I have a wonderful girlfriend, and I am happy. But nevertheless, everyone feels sorry for me, and thinks that I am miserable, because I was born different. My mother has still not lost hope that I will come to my senses and find a man, get married and give birth to her grandchildren.”

Especially problematic is the situation faced by ethnic Kyrgyz lesbians, who are particularly susceptible to discrimination by their families and wider society, and provoke the wrath of religious leaders.

Loma Yusur Yakubovich, the head of administration of the Islamic clergy in Kyrgyzstan, described homosexuality as a “great sin”.

“Islam categorically does not accept these people,” he said. “It is haaram [forbidden]. It is also a disgrace for the family. Allah made all people as men or women. There should not be any other possibility. A woman who performs the role of a man is an anomaly, a psychological deviation. A normal woman should marry and give birth to children. If she chooses another path, then she is at the very least behaving amorally.”

He suggested the burgeoning gay rights movement is simply a fad.

“Our country wants to seem advanced and democratic. So now we have the opportunity even to fight for the rights of sexual minorities in a country where more than 90 per cent of the population is Muslim,” he said.

“But I do not think that this is an achievement. We are on the contrary moving backwards. The main reason for the amoral behaviour of young people is the difficult socio-economic situation.”

Perhaps not surprising then that Erik Iriskulbekov’s Adilet legal aid centre seldom hears from lesbians who’ve suffered from bigotry.

“Only once did someone come to us for help,” he said. “The other women who face discrimination have to put up with this, because by announcing their rights, they risk drawing even more aggression from society.”

But there are bright spots on the horizon for Kyrgyzstan’s lesbian community. Gay men’s groups who’ve been campaigning for ten years now insist that attitudes are changing.

Vladimir Tyupin from the Oasis youth foundation, which works to protect the rights of gay men, said his group now comes under less pressure from the authorities than in the past and is even expanding its activities to the more conservative south.

“I think that lesbians will also be successful and they will be able to win people over,” he said.

Despite the difficult times ahead, Labris members also remain hopeful that they will one day be accepted by Kyrgyz society.

“If we were not certain that we could stand up for our rights, gain acceptance from society, love each other openly like everyone else, register our marriages legally and have families, we would not have gathered together to fight. This will take years, and perhaps several generations. But we have come out of the underground and have been the first to do so” said Sveta.

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