



## Conference Report

### The Women's Same-Sex Forum and African Women's Life History Project of Sex and Secrecy: The 4th Conference of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture, and Society

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The 4<sup>th</sup> Conference of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society (IASSCS), *Sex and Secrecy*, was held June 22-25, 2003, in Johannesburg, South Africa. IASSCS is a relatively new interdisciplinary association organized in 1997 with an explicit focus on the intersections of sexuality, culture, health, and society. As noted on the conference's current website (<http://wiserweb.wits.ac.za/conf2003>), the impetus behind the creation of IASSCS was the perceived need to address the fragmentation of studies in sexuality and to provide a forum for expanding and developing sexuality as a legitimate area of scholarship. The organization is both academic and policy oriented, and has developed a strong international network of NGOs, funding organizations, and scholars.

Organized around the theme of "Sex and Secrecy," the conference generated presentations on a wide range of topics, from the politics of sexuality, sexuality and HIV/AIDS, histories of sexuality and prejudice, religion and sexuality, to gender-based violence. In addition to the many excellent presentations on these topics, two forums specifically addressed lesbian sexualities, the Women's Same-Sex Forum and the African Women's Life History Project. Since the 1st international meeting of IASSCS, Saskia Wieringa, a Dutch anthropologist, feminist, and activist—and the new president of IASSCS—initiated and organized a women's same-sex

forum to ensure that lesbian voices are represented in the association and at the conferences. The forum consists of a set of panels oriented to topics addressing lesbian identities, sexualities, and health practices. Papers presented in the women's same-sex forum in Melbourne, Australia (2001) specifically focused on lesbian and female transgender practices in Asia. With the addition of relevant papers from the Johannesburg forum, these papers will be published in a volume edited by Saskia Wieringa, Abha Bhaiya, and Evelyn Blackwood.

One of the difficulties in organizing these sessions has been the problem of getting lesbian activist organizers to attend and present papers at the conferences. Since part of the mission of IASSCS is to create a dialogue between academics, practitioners, and activists, forum organizers felt it was important to incorporate lesbian activists who are working on the front lines in their countries to gain visibility and acceptance for lesbians. With the designation of Johannesburg as the site of the 4<sup>th</sup> conference, Saskia Wieringa collaborated with Ruth Morgan of Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa (GALA) to develop an innovative approach that would encourage lesbian activists in Africa both in their research and activism. With funding from HIVOS, the Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries ([www.hivos.nl](http://www.hivos.nl)), they created the African Women's Life

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History Project. Through this project, they recruited and trained nine women activists from seven African countries to conduct interviews with women who are involved in same-sex relationships.<sup>1</sup> The results of these interviews will be published in a volume edited by Wieringa and Morgan.

The conference theme of “Sex and Secrecy” fit quite well with the papers produced by the researchers in the African Women’s Life History Project. Researchers recounted the numerous obstacles they faced in getting interviews, even though they used their own activist and friendship networks to find women to interview. The fear of exposure affected not only the interviewees but the researchers as well. All researchers requested that their names and photographs, and names of their organizations not be released to the media or used in any publications (including this one). As was pointed out by several of the researchers, the need for secrecy is in part a response to state pronouncements that homosexuality is un-African and destructive of culture.

The legal situation for homosexuals in Africa is inconsistent; homosexuality is protected under the constitution of South Africa, while in other countries, such as Tanzania and Uganda, homosexuality is punishable by imprisonment. Namibia, Kenya, and Swaziland have laws against homosexual sodomy. Discriminatory practices emanate not only from the state and its representatives, but also from citizens who engage in harassment and physical violence against lesbians, a fact attested to both in the life history project papers and the forum.

The accusation that homosexuality is “destructive of culture” strikes particularly harshly against lesbian women, who are expected, and in some cases forced, to marry and raise children. As the researcher from Uganda noted, the claim that homosexuality is against a group’s cultural beliefs stems from the assertion that “stable” families headed by men are the foundation of the culture. Homosexuality is thus perceived as a threat to the “culture” itself because it is thought to undermine family structure. In such contexts women have to “prove” that they are heterosexual by marrying

and/or bearing children for fear that they will otherwise be ostracized from their families and communities. Secrecy and silence then act as strategies to avoid violence, and yet these strategies also help to create and preserve spaces for women to be together because the general population is unaware of their existence.

In fact, conference participants struggled with this question of secrecy. It appears to be an oppressive condition that denies people freedom to live as they choose, yet the opposite of secrecy, exposure or “truth” (coming out of the closet), is a modernist Western strategy that may be politically and personally damaging in many contexts. Historically in Europe and the U.S. it has long been the prerogative of the wealthy or well-off to act as they desire, a fact that helps to explain the rise of the gay rights movement among the financially secure middle classes. Openness is closely tied to economic security; consequently, for women in southern Africa, most of whom are more vulnerable economically than their gay male colleagues, it is much more difficult to become “out” activists and develop a movement that can address lesbians’ needs.

Despite on-going claims by heads of state that homosexuality is “un-African,” the papers by the researchers in the African Women’s Life History Project demonstrated that homosexuality in Africa is not new; what is new is the activist demand for recognition of relationships that in the past were and today are sedimented within family, kinship, and religious structures (see also Aarmo, 1999). In Uganda clerics and state leaders have suppressed knowledge of the past so that many young lesbians have no sense of former practices. Yet one of the themes to emerge from the project was the cultural context of sexualities. For example, set within religious and ritual frameworks are the South African “lesbian” *sangomas*, women ritual practitioners whose ancestor spirits call them to take wives. In addition, marriage practices in a number of African countries, including Kenya, allow a woman with wealth or without sons to marry another woman to provide her with heirs. A couple interviewed by the Kenyan researcher insisted that no sexual relations occur in these marriages. Whether or not their relations are sexual, Babere Chacha, in a related paper from the Women’s Same-Sex Forum, “Does a Woman Who

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1. Researchers came from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Namibia, Swaziland, Botswana, and South Africa.

Marries a Woman Become a Man? Real Desires in Woman to Woman Marriage in Africa,” noted that the practice of a woman marrying a female husband remains a model for women sharing their lives with other women. Regarding adolescent girls, the researchers from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Swaziland provided further confirmation of the prevalence of same-sex relationships in all-girl schools (see also Gay, 1986). According to one interviewee from Kenya, “Love affairs were a common thing in our school and girls did not hide it.”

Evident in most of the findings from the African Women’s Life History Project is the way lesbian women’s lives, despite the secrecy, are embedded in broader kinship relations. For example, women in couple relationships were usually closely involved with larger family groupings. One researcher from Namibia reported that “lesbian men,” lesbians who identify as men, carry heavy responsibilities for their girlfriends and girlfriends’ family members. Many family problems are diverted to the lesbian men to handle. In fact, the broader context of these women’s lives suggest that a focus only on “sexuality” and “same-sex relations” will in fact cause researchers to overlook other aspects of their lives that are critical to our understanding of genders and sexualities.

Key to many of the findings was the question of gender. Many same-sex couples consist of “butch-femme” pairs, in which one acts like a typical man in that particular society, while the other is normatively feminine, and often already has children. This pattern is true in rural and urban areas. The masculine lesbian in South Africa “is a man to her lover, but knows she is a woman.” Butches are called “tommy boys” in Uganda. Because they are like men, tommy boys are somewhat tolerated. Discussing the construction of masculine identity, researchers noted that like men, tommy boys or lesbian men often have multiple partners, work in men’s jobs, drink, and are prone to violence. In relationships tommy boys follow the masculine ideology that says men provide for their partners and take charge of the household. Although claiming masculine privilege and heterosexual ideology, tommy boys also disrupt gender regimes, according to one of the researchers from Namibia.

Butch-femme roles are not the only form of

lesbian relationships in these countries, however. In South Africa, one of the researchers noted that some lesbians are shifting from a more masculine to a more feminine role over time in their relationships, underscoring the importance of the social context in the construction of lesbian identities. Slightly older couples in the 25-40 age range in urban areas of South Africa express little of the butch-femme pattern; they see themselves as women who love women, reflecting changing gender ideologies in urban and globalized contexts.

The papers in the Women’s Same-Sex Forum dovetailed nicely with those of the African Women’s Life History Project, speaking to the violence against lesbians as well as the secrecy and fear of exposure that affects lesbians in Europe and the U.S. as well as Africa.<sup>2</sup> Jane Edwards, in her paper “Same-Sex Attracted Women in Rural Australia: Community Narratives, Invisibility and Secrecy,” noted that rural Australian lesbians’ fear of being seen as queer ties in with the fact that masculinity, as defined through sports and drinking, is re-created as a national identity for men.

A key issue raised throughout the sessions was the question of naming or labeling. Due to the visibility of “lesbian and gay” rights movements in Europe and the U.S., many activists in Africa, rather than using local words, have claimed the English words “lesbian” and “gay” as visible signifiers for their movements. They prefer the English terms because many local terms are derogatory and cannot be recouped in a positive manner at this point in time. And yet, as some of the presenters noted, the term “lesbian,” which is associated with a particular form of same-sex identity and practice in Europe and the U.S., represents a static identity that can prevent us from recognizing the multiplicity of local identities and relationships among women (and lesbian men) who love women. As pointed out by Blackwood in her paper, “Lesbian, Transgendered and Queer Subjects: Notes on

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2. Papers included those by: Helena Hewat and Marlene Arndt, “The Experiences of Stress and Trauma: Black Lesbians in South Africa”; and, Susan Miner, “The Intersectionality of Silences: Parity-impeding Cultural Norms as Contexts for the Use of Violent and Other Controlling Behaviours in Lesbian Partnerships.”

Difference,” if we choose to use the generic terms “lesbian” and “gay,” we need to pay special attention to the particular historical conditions of same-sex relations in each country and maintain an awareness of the problems and possibilities created by using those terms.

Abha Bhaiya’s paper, “Female Friendships,” argued for enlarging the discussion of women’s relations beyond the sexual to include friendship as a way of allowing recognition of the multiple and rich forms of relationships and identities available to women. In assessing the historical transformations of lesbian and gay movements, it is also important to recognize the gendered differences (in access, networks, finances, and ideologies of self) that keep most movements from being equally and jointly “lesbian-and-gay” (Blackwood).

As both the forum and life history project attest, greater attention to the specifics of women’s lives, experiences, and practices are essential for advancing our understanding of human sexuality and human intimacy. ♦

### References

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