



Written Out: How Sexuality is Used to Attack Women's Organizing

Published by the *International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission* and the *Center for Women's Global Leadership*

Feminists are constructed as loose women, promiscuous. Your stature as a political activist, your academic background matters less or even becomes tarred when you're not in a relationship with a man. Anything can and will be used against you, including whether you have children. If you don't, you are potentially labeled as an unnatural woman...if you do have children, then you're accused of neglecting them...I'm surprised they're not burning us at the stake, really..."

-Bernadette Muthien, South African activist

Overview:

Around the world, in local communities, national politics, and global settings, women's leadership is consistently disparaged and attacked. In ***Written Out: How Sexuality is Used to Attack Women's Organizing (2005)***, the *International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission* (IGLHRC) and the *Center for Women's Global Leadership* have documented the seemingly universal ways in which women's own sexuality, gender, and real or perceived sexual orientation are used to attack their credibility and ability to advocate effectively for social justice and human rights. From Hillary Clinton (USA) to Azalina Othman Said (Malaysia), women who apply their passion, talent and political skill in the public domain face the harshest of attacks and innuendo about their sexuality in an effort to force them to back down or be silent altogether. When successful, these attacks can dramatically and adversely impact women's progress in moving issues of concern to them to the center of the political stage, particularly when they are issues that threaten the social order.

"Sexuality-baiting" and "lesbian-baiting" are practices of strategically using negative ideas or prejudices about women's sexuality to intimidate, humiliate, embarrass or stifle the expression of women. Baiting is a tool used to discourage women from organizing on gender, sexuality and other social justice issues. It is deployed by both state and non-state actors who publicly judge women's political work and individual identities as, for a range of reasons, "threatening to authority."

Written Out (2005) is an updated version of IGLHRC's and the Center's groundbreaking publication first released in 2000 at the fifth anniversary of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women. That publication unleashed a torrent of discussion and stories from women human rights leaders and other activists whose public advocacy leaves them subject to charges of being sexually licentious, dangerous, immoral, perverted, or a threat to culture, tradition, the family, and moral codes in general. ***Written Out (2005)*** was first introduced at a public event in March, 2005, to coincide with Beijing +10, the tenth anniversary of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China in September 1995.

The revised report stresses that the global rise in all forms of fundamentalism – religious, political, social and economic – put women's organizing and women activists at risk. It documents the continued, or even increased use of "sexuality-baiting" and "lesbian-baiting" to discredit the work of women organizers and women's organizations, including, but not limited to those organizations that focus on women's sexual rights. As a result, some women's organizations, for fear of being further disenfranchised, are reluctant to openly bring up issues of sexuality, sexual rights and reproductive rights. The 2005 report addresses several new issues: the previous discussion about sexuality-baiting and lesbian-baiting in UN conferences has been updated through 2004; it includes a more intensive analysis of how women in public leadership are targeted for attacks on their sexuality (regardless of their sexual orientation); and it assesses the impact of recent political trends – such as the growth of fundamentalisms, the rise of the security state, and the continuing undercurrent of misogyny and homophobia that inform these trends – as these generate or deter sexuality- and lesbian-baiting.

Since its publication, the original report has been used by women throughout the world in both community and academic settings as a tool for understanding and discussing a seemingly universal dynamic: many women who dare to assert their leadership and perspectives as public advocates must contend with the disparagement and silencing of their identities and political visions through sexuality-based attacks.

Major Findings:

- Baiting continues to be a barrier to women's human rights advocacy. Baiting by political opponents, community members, the police or other government officials is an easy tool for discrediting not only individual women and the groups with which they work, but also their political visions and goals. Women's human rights defenders, as well as others, are at particular risk of being targeted, not just because of the work they do, but also because of who they are or are imagined to be.
- Baiting is not limited to any one country, cultural, religion or political perspective. It takes place in developed and developing countries; it can be framed in any number of religious and cultural contexts; the means to enforce the attacks can be insidious or explosive. *Written Out* documents baiting incidents from all parts of the world; our research shows that sexuality-baiting is used as a means to stifle political

and personal expression whenever women's agendas or identities are branded by those in authority as "too threatening" to a state, an ideology or a tradition.

- *Written Out* confirms that sexuality-baiting and lesbian-baiting remain effective and widely-used tactics against women engaged in sexual rights work. The 2001 report of the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on human rights defenders noted that women's human rights groups and those who are active on issues of sexuality, especially in relation to sexual orientation and reproductive rights, are at specific risk for targeting. "These groups are often very vulnerable to prejudice, to marginalization and to public repudiation, not only by State forces but other social actors."

Highlights:

As we note in the report, baiting can occur anywhere in the world. The following three stories are indicative of the range and scope of baiting attacks:

- Cordoba, Argentina, the home of strong women's sexual, reproductive rights and health movements, has also in recent years become a hotbed of attack from religious extremist organizations. In February 2004, Human Life International (HLI), arguing that the right to life from conception should be preserved, filed a challenge to the legal status and registration of *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* (Catholics for the Right to Decide, CDD), a global network dedicated to ensuring that women's sexual and reproductive rights are understood to be in concert with, rather than opposition to, the fundamental tenets of Catholicism. HLI claimed that CDD's objectives were "contrary to the common good and the legal code." Despite a legal finding that CDD's activities were in conformity with national law, HLI continues its efforts to have CDD de-registered and to delegitimize CDD, and has decided to appeal the decision.
- In Thailand, a woman holding a leadership position in the NGO Coordinating Committee of Thailand, an organization that helps groups in remote regions of the country secure their economic and social rights as well as ensure sustainable development, received sexually harassing phone calls during the period when the NGO Committee had been advocating against an Asia Development Bank-sponsored gas pipeline project. During a public demonstration captured on video, police physically assaulted and tore the clothing of another woman who held a microphone during a rally. However, the footage aired on television edited out the police involvement in the assault, and officials ultimately claimed that "women were tearing off their bras in order to be on TV!"
- In October of 2003, the former president of the US-based National Organization for Women, and at the time, the director of the Young Women's Christian Association-US (YWCA), was asked by the board of directors to resign her position and was dismissed when she refused quietly to do so. The impetus for this decision by the board of directors was a public campaign launched by the Traditional Values Coalition (TVC) in the form of a sophisticated

outreach strategy designed to mobilize web readers to take action toward her dismissal. The TVC website contained a statement urging the YWCA Board to "sever their relationship ... immediately to protect girls from the director's radical, bisexual, cross-dressing, and pro-abortion agenda." Website readers, could, with one click at the bottom of the page, sign a letter of concern and send letters to local media outlets.

Conclusions/Recommendations:

The *International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission* and the *Center for Women's Global Leadership* believe that sexuality- and lesbian-baiting put human rights of women at risk.

- We call upon all actors to ensure women's full enjoyment of their human rights: by striking fear in women who seek to challenge conventional norms of gender and sexuality, patterns of baiting hamper women's freedom to freely express their political views and engage openly in political organizing. The media has an important role to play in ensuring that the *real* issues get portrayed accurately, rather than giving greater play to bogus claims.
- We call on the police and other governmental authorities to end the impunity with which these attacks take place: all too often, the very governmental authorities who are charged with protecting women's ability to engage in political activity become their persecutors, or allow the attacks to take place with impunity for the perpetrators. As such, they compromise women's liberty and security.
- We call upon our allies to challenge and oppose such pernicious attempts to hamstring women's ability to organize effectively – indeed, to demand that those who engage in such attacks “play fair” rather than “play dirty.” Human rights norms affirm freedom of expression – political disagreements should be discussed on their merits, rather than through personal, devastating, and potentially dangerous false accusations.
- We call on all actors to recognize that such attacks run counter to international human rights norms and standards, including women's rights to control their gender expression, gender identity and sexuality. Finally, all advocates and protectors of human rights must affirm and act upon the indivisibility of rights and freedoms. When human rights are at stake, they must not allow their own ranks to be divided. They must work in coalition wherever possible, to give strength to the vulnerable and restore voices to the voiceless.

Introducing New Human Rights Report:

Written Out: How Sexuality is Used to Attack Women's Organizing

Relevant for use in courses related to *human rights, women's studies, sexuality studies, lesbian and gay studies, and international politics and activism*, **Written Out** is co-published by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) and the Center for Women's Global Leadership, Rutgers University and available for purchase through Women, Ink. (www.womenink.org) and IGLHRC (www.iglhrc.org), for \$15 (reduced rates available for bulk orders). Review copies for Fall 2005 and Spring 2006 semester courses are available from IGLHRC by contacting Nathan Levitt at nlevitt@iglhrc.org. Copies are downloadable at www.iglhrc.org

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