

A Young Lebanese Woman talks about her lesbian identity, her relationships and her perspective on homosexuality

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In recent years, Lebanon has witnessed a proliferation of the gay and lesbian community; at least that's one generalization many are willing to agree upon. But, agreeing is one thing and providing accurate data is another. In the absence of the latter, the issue is bound to remain subject to generalizations only. As a reporter seeking information on the topic, I learned this fact hands-on. I also learned my task was almost futile when it came down to the lesbian community. There were simply too many obstacles and hindrances. You just didn't go about investigating the way you did with other topics. One had to be discreet ... really discreet. "People will assume you're a lesbian if you go about asking about lesbian women," my friend bluntly spelled it out for me. She wasn't alone. I heard similar misgivings from just about anyone I asked for help. At one point the insistent warnings affected me, and I found myself unconsciously exhibiting a great amount of secretiveness. This, however, got me nowhere ... except perhaps through several dead ends. Thus, I realized I had to turn a deaf ear. The problem didn't stop here. For out of the 17 lesbian women I was able to contact, none agreed to speak about their experiences. Most were, in fact, absolutely adamant about the matter. That is not to mention the number of women some of my acquaintances approached. Strangely, some of these women had no previous qualms about divulging their identity to friends and acquaintances. But, when it came to speaking to the media, they just wouldn't budge. As Lebanese lesbian women, they felt they were a minority within a minority. They also claimed speaking publicly would only result in a scandal. Luckily, there was one exception; a twenty-three year old arts graduate whom I shall refer to as BINO – as she has specifically asked me to do. I have to admit that from the moment Bino agreed to be interviewed to the moment the interview actually took place, I was absolutely sure she would change her mind, but nothing of the sort happened. Bino simply took a while to settle on a day and time. She said she was busy redesigning and painting her room, and so

left the day and date of the meeting hanging. One day, she called to say I could meet her in a trading/ movie center around Beirut. I arrived shortly only to find her sitting in an internet café, chatting to other lesbian women on the net. She said hello, asked if I didn't mind waiting and continued typing on the keyboard. I tried not to intrude on her online conversation, but some tasks are hard to fulfill. Therefore, I abandoned all pretense of indifference and jotted down some of what was said between Bino and the other Arab woman named Laziiz.

After the chatting was over, Bino suggested we sit in a patisserie, which – according to her – is the site of the gay and lesbian community. We sat there for five hours. During that time, several people came in... winked and whispered to Bino about me, wanting to know if I was her new girlfriend... I felt slightly nervous. Soon, however, I became really nervous when an undercover police agent - identified by Bino as such - came into the place and watched us. According to Bino, such agents were regular visitors. They monitored the place to track down homosexual couples, plans for orgy nights, and drug deals. This really made me nervous. After all, in my haste to interview Bino before she changed her mind, I had forgotten my press card. Thankfully, the interview continued with no interference from the agent. Below is an account of what Bino wrote to her online friends, what she said and what she tried to say. I learned some things about Bino which I am not at liberty to disclose because she has requested that they not be included for she feels readers may recognize her. Furthermore, it appears that she's just too proud to admit life hasn't been easy on her.

Laziiz: What's your name?

Bino: Bino. Are you feminine?

Laziiz: Yeh

Bino: Do you like dikes or just normal feminine looking girls....

Laziiz: Dikes?

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Bino: I mean masculine looking girls. I mean short hair.

Laziiz: No I don't like them. Do you?

Bino: Then you won't like me. I like feminine girls.

Laziiz:

Bino: bye, byeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

Bino cuts the line off abruptly. She grabs a cigarette, sighs exasperatedly and says women like Laziiz upset her: "I can't understand how they can be feminine and at the same time like feminine looking girls." I ask her what she likes. She responds by asking me what I think of her looks. "You have cute features," I say. The young woman doesn't seem flattered and immediately retorts: "Well some men have cute features." She snatches her smoking kit, pays her internet fees and invites me into a well known patisserie. Inside, she buys me juice, leads me to a table, and wonders if I mind her smoking - not that she listens when I tell her I do. By now, I have already changed my mind. I mean I still thought Bino had cute features, but nothing about her attitude and mannerism was feminine - at least not in the general sense of the word. At times I almost felt I was talking to a guy. And talking we did ... despite Bino's mood swings, her thought diversions and her resistance to certain questions.

Bino: It started when I was four years old ... yes write that. It's a very rare thing but at four I had feelings for girls. There was a girl in school who meant a lot to me. Abir Hamdar: But kids that age don't usually have these kinds of feelings?

Bino: It was very innocent, but the tendency was present at that age. I had strange feelings for her. I was jealous if she spoke to other girls. I loved her. This tendency increased with time. I continued to feel jealous when girls I liked talked to other girls ... A really strange feeling. I tell you it was innocent at the time. Now that I look back on it, I know it started at an early age. But I was seven when I tried things with a girl. I flirted with her.

AB: Flirted?

Bino: Hey, are you innocent? Yes, flirted. I touched her, kissed her ... and I don't know what awakened these tendencies. We flirted for several years. That doesn't mean there weren't other girls... girls that I fell in love with. But with them, I didn't reach the flirting stage. By the way, do you know my family name?

AB: No...

Bino: (Sighs...) So now I can relax.

AB: Why, is your family so well-known?

Bino: That's not it. It's just that they don't know. My parents are probably the only people who don't know. I don't have a problem with the issue. But if they knew, they wouldn't be able to comprehend ...

AB: Is any member of your family/relative a gay or a lesbian?

Bino: I don't know ... perhaps my mom is a lesbian. Who can say! Ya ma taht al-sawahi dawahi ...anyway let's go back to when I was seven. I don't know what awakened these feelings at the time. And, as I've said, for several years I continued to flirt with the girl from our family.

AB: Did you feel, at the time, that you were doing something wrong?

Bino: No ...not at all. Not with this girl. I mean there was the fact that she was family. You always feel secure with family....

AB: You said there were other girls ...

Bino: Yes.

AB: But you were so young ...

Bino: Yes, but I felt something for girls. Sometimes when I experienced intense feelings for them, I would write them letters, love letters. Of course, this happened as I grew older. Every couple of years I felt attached to a certain girl.

AB: Were the girls that attracted you also lesbian?

Bino: Sometimes ... it usually started as friendship. Then, I would seduce them. Emotionally ... spiritually ...

AB: How is that?

Bino: Imagine a guardian angel. You become so used to it, you cannot live without it. That was how they felt towards me. I would become their guardian angel. Besides, each person has homosexual tendencies, but it's present in degrees. Some tendencies can be worked on.

AB: So you mean the girls that interested you also became attached to you once you provided them with emotional care?

Bino: Don't use the word emotional ! Between women relationships are always more spiritual. You have to understand there's a difference between gays and lesbians. For gays it's more physical. For lesbians it's something more ... that's my opinion. Take a father and mother ... Moms are more tender.

AB: Regarding the letters ...

Bino: (Interrupts) They were letters about feelings. It wasn't physically developed. I was afraid to show my fantasies ... fantasies that involved girls.

AB: But you said at seven you touched and kissed a girl?

Bino: Because she was family. Also, at that age society didn't matter. As you grow older things become different. I felt attracted to girls. My sexual fantasies were girls ... every second, every minute.

AB: At that age, did you feel there was something different about you?

Bino: Yes, I felt different from other kids. And I didn't trust anyone enough. In the beginning, you think

you're the only one in the world like this. Then you start meeting people like you who give you courage. Courage to be who you are. When I first started having physical relationships with girls, I felt disturbed. As if I was doing something wrong. That was in the beginning. Now I don't experience any such feelings. I am at peace with who I am.

AB: So, when did your first physical relationship with a girl take place?

Bino: I don't remember (silence. Lights a cigarette...) It was in a camp. I was probably sixteen. It was a one-night stand. She was a lesbian.

AB: How did you first know she was a lesbian? I mean when you feel attracted to a woman, how do you know she's going to respond? They say it's more difficult to identify a lesbian than a gay?

Bino: Yes, you can't easily identify a lesbian. Still, I simply look into their eyes and I know exactly what they are.

AB: Is that why you've been focusing on my eyes?

Bino: (Doesn't answer.) Do you want to see a picture of my ex-girlfriend?

AB: If you want to...

(Shows me the picture)

Bino: Isn't she pretty? Look at her eyes. They speak volumes. I loved her a lot. When I first met her I thought she was straight. She called me several times to ask for favors regarding men. One day, she invited me to her place to study with her. (Whistles) We studied a lot. A very hot lesson.

AB: If she didn't invite you, would you have approached her?

Bino: I rarely do that. If a girl comes, fine. If not, bye bye... unless she gives me the impression that she's desperate for my attentions. If she's straight, I would not think of coming near her, even if she asked me to rub oil all over her body. (Silent) The best thing about these relationships is when you think a girl is straight and it turns out she's not. It's an absolute turn-on. Very exciting! Hey, you didn't ask me if I had relationships with guys?

AB: Did you?

Bino: I'm a girl. I'm supposed to date guys. So, one starts experimenting and trying. One ends up not feeling anything. It's like a question you ask yourself. What's my position with regard to men?

AB: What's your position?

Bino: Nothing ... terrible! Why terrible? Because I feel absolutely nothing for them. By the way, how old are you?

AB: 27...

Bino's mobile rings. It is her girlfriend. Bino talks to her angrily and then hangs up. "We fight a lot. We are both the jealous type." As she says this, she calls her girlfriend again, whispers to her and hangs up.

AB: Let's go back to your parents, didn't they and don't they notice anything?

Bino: Why should they notice? I mean it's not as if I was feminine and have become something else. I was always a tomboy. They don't feel any difference.

AB: Don't they notice that you don't date guys?

Bino: They urge me to go out with guys. I simply tell them I don't like anyone. I usually invent a solid reason. ... I need a haircut! Do you think I need a haircut?

AB: It is already too short...

Bino: My bangs need trimming.

AB: Weren't you ever interested in such things as make-up, fashion ...?

Bino: I've fashioned myself like a boy. From the beginning, I used to cut my hair very short. As for make-up, I only apply it on Halloween.... Were you ever attracted to a girl?

AB: No...

Bino: Following the one-night stand I had at 16, I fell in love. It was the first true love. I liked her femininity. She was a straight girl. Really straight. We became best friends. I didn't tell her anything about my feelings. She liked me a lot, but not the way I liked her. After three years of knowing her, I finally admitted my feelings for her. I was drunk and I called her. She was very cool about the matter. I felt extremely relieved. Imagine suppressing such feelings ... She's getting married soon. I introduced her to her future husband. Of course during those three years, I had other relationships.

AB: Were there other straight girls that you fell in love with?

Bino: Yes. I shared an apartment with a girl during my years in college. In the beginning she was straight. With time, I changed her.

AB: What exactly did you do to change her?

Bino: (laughs...) Well, for one we lived together. One day, something just happened. I also did other things But later I screwed up our relationship. I wasn't faithful. She sacked me or let's say I was forced to leave. She became a bisexual...

AB: You sound as if you're not in favor of bisexuality?

Bino: Yes, I am against it. I try to understand them. But, with bi's they are always more inclined towards one specific sex, which makes you wonder if they are really bi's....By the way do you think I am feminine?

AB: Not really ... Why do you think you prefer girls? Does it have to do with your genes, a trauma in your life, or merely a choice ... Is there and should there be a reason for being who you are?

Bino: There are reasons for being a lesbian. It's not just biological. There's the environment. I don't know. But for me I think it was my mom's affection. I am an only child. As a child she gave me so much affection.

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I grew used to female affection. That's how I see it. Besides with women relationships are more satisfying...

AB: In what way?

Bino: They have more depth ... When you click with a girl, a certain kind of telepathy occurs. This is one of the things that makes it so special. The things you can do with a girl you can't do with a guy.

AB: What things?

Bino: Everything. Women are so interesting. What's interesting about a guy? Rally? Cars? Blah, blah... They are not deep. Listen, you should come and live with me.

AB: Why? Do you want to change who I am?

Bino: (Laughs...) there are certain things I can't say or explain immediately. I need time.... Do you think my hands are feminine? Hands say a lot about one's identity.

AB: I don't know. You don't seem to give them a lot of care...

Bino: (Observes her hands again.) Don't they resemble male hands?

AB: Perhaps...

Bino: Remind me of the name of the magazine the interview will appear in?

AB: Al Raida ...

Bino: (Talks about her other relationships ... sometimes in great detail.)

AB: Do many people know you're a lesbian?

Bino: With straight people I'm straight. With homosexuals, I'm a lesbian.

AB: So you don't speak about it in public?

Bino: I think it's better to be silent. It's none of anyone's business. Many people claim they want to make you part of society, but they don't want to really...

AB: So it's hard to be who you are in Lebanon?

Bino: With me people are very natural. I mean people aren't revolted by masculine girls. There are a lot of masculine girls around. I think it's harder on feminine guys. People can't stand that. (Starts scribbling on the paper).

AB: When you have a relationship with a girl, can you court her the way other couples do? Can you go out for a romantic dinner? Touch her in public? Lebanon still prohibits these kinds of relationships?

Bino: Yes, we dine together. I can touch her in public, but only in certain parts of her body... Actually, there's something great about it. Not being able to be physically expressive in public makes the whole relationship more passionate.... You become very hot when you can't touch her the way you want to. By the way, did you know that 90% of males are obsessed with lesbians. They like to watch lesbians making love. That's the thing that really turns them on. Many males I know have insistently begged to watch me and my girl-

friend...

AB: Really?

Bino: Yes and if you don't believe me, I'll prove it to you. See that guy sitting there, I'll go and ask him and you'll see what he says.

AB: Did anyone ever watch you and your girlfriend?

Bino: (Silent...)No, of course not. Do you think I've had too many relationships?

AB: You've had an active love life...

Bino: Don't mention all the relationships I've told you about! Just include the main ones.

AB: What about marriage, kids ... doesn't that mean anything to you?

Bino: It's babies day out. Have you seen the movie? ... Look, I love kids. But, it's not my business to have them. I wasn't born for that... I am even against homosexual couples adopting a kid. It's a hard thing for the child...

AB: And marriage?

Bino: I want to get a job, find a girl to fall in love with and live together.

AB: Can you do that in Lebanon?

Bino: In Lebanon, there are no laws that prohibit two girls from living together. And even if there was a problem, I can organize a cover-up. I can marry a gay and my girlfriend can also marry one. We can live together. By the way, what do you think of me ... I mean as a person.

AB: I have only just known you. But you seem like a nice person. ...They say there are a lot of gays and lesbians in Lebanon?

Bino: (Whistles) Let me tell you something, any person you see on the street could be a gay or a lesbian ... (Laughs) Must be upsetting for you ladies. It prevents you from finding a straight guy to date.

AB: Why do you think that is the case?

Bino: I don't know. But it's bound to happen. From a wide perspective, it's good to have homosexual couples! It's one form of population control. In Lebanon, it's 'a la mode'. Many girls have asked to have a physical relationship with me. They are straight, but they just want to try this kind of relationship ... I hate these girls. Why be something you are not...? Straight men are trying it for the same reasons. Has a lesbian ever given you a compliment?

AB: No ...

Bino: You should be flattered if she does. It means you're really special. A compliment from a lesbian means a lot ... keep that in mind.

AB: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Bino: If a girl goes out with a lot of guys, remember that she could be dissatisfied. She could also be a lesbian. Some girls can't even have an orgasm with a guy. And remember a relationship with a girl is more spiritual and deep... Girls have more imagination ...