

Honduras: transgender women living in virtual prison

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Thousands of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender (LGBT) people in Honduras face discrimination and attacks on a daily basis. Most of them are too afraid to talk. Erica (originally Eric) David Yañez was murdered in the streets of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, by two police officers on 15 July 2003.

Elkyn Suárez, a transgender activist, had some valuable information about the killing that she passed on to the authorities. In September 2003, she was forced to flee the country after receiving death threats.

Elkyn now lives in a European country where she has been granted asylum. As part of a process of asserting her gender identity, she has started legal proceedings to get a new officially-recognized name.

The San Pedro Gay Community was formed in 1993 when it started HIV/AIDS prevention work in the city of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. However, the members of the community often had to conceal their work of promoting and defending the human rights of people targeted on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They were very limited in what they could do because the government would not grant them the legal recognition that would have allowed their organization to work openly. The government has recently granted the organization this legal recognition.

This decision has been strongly condemned by some who see lesbian, gay or transgender activists as a danger to society and seek to persist in discriminating against them while ignoring the positive work they do on behalf of human rights. The government should stay firm on their decision, which is based on the law and respect for everyone.

"In the year 2000, the gay community decided to work, not just on HIV/AIDS problems, but also on the high level of human rights violations being committed by the government. Human rights violations increased in 2003 when the Honduran National Congress passed the 'Police and Harmonious Citizen Relations' law, which granted further powers to the police.

"The government justified the law by saying that it was intended to preserve morality and decency, but, when the government talks about morality and decency, it completely excludes sexual minorities from society. At that time, gays or transgender [people] began to increasingly face job losses, restrictions on education, arrest, attacks, violence and multiple killings."

Elkyn says that Honduran society opposes the legislation, but people are afraid to speak out. "In Honduras, the political authorities and the police have so much power that they get to hear about it. But they won't put you in jail; they'll take away your right to life."

Elkyn Suárez describes herself as a human rights defender, who, along with others from the LGBT community in Honduras, faced increasing restrictions to their own rights as they tried to work on human rights issues. She says that there were many arrests and much intimidation and the community is constantly isolated and excluded from the human rights programme operated by the government.

"I myself was arrested and threatened on many occasions. There was enormous fear, but we needed to speak out, to stop the suffering, to stop seeing so many deaths day after day, because, every day, you would see two or three gay men or women had been murdered. The authorities said that it had to be like that because, given the type of life we had chosen to lead, we did not have the right to live in our own country."

She accuses the government of refusing to acknowledge when a crime against someone in the LGBT community has taken place. "For us, there is rape; for us, there are the murder victims; for our friends and our families, there are the multiple killings, but, for the government, none of that has ever happened. You hear on the news that a transexual girl or a transgender

boy has been murdered. That makes news in the press, but, when we try to take action, we are always left isolated by the media and the news."

She identifies the role of international organizations and the international community as being that of listener. She says that, although they would always go on fighting without receiving a positive response, someone must be aware of what has happened.

"You have to speak out, because that is what counts. In the past, I wasn't very aware of what was going on around me, but now I realize that when people speak out, things can change."

She wrote a letter to the President of Honduras on the anniversary of Erica's murder, asking him for justice. Above all, she asked that the authorities stop excluding LGBT people in Honduras.

"We are part of Honduran society; we are not demanding special treatment, just the rights that the constitution itself grants us: the right not to be discriminated against and the right to education. I am a clear example of the immense damage the Honduran Government is inflicting on a section of the population. In the ten years since I decided to live my life my own way, I have never had access to a decent job, I have never been able to get an education, I have never had the fundamental right to a home, a family -- the kind of environment everyone else can have. That is unjust and must stop."

She says that, if she were to meet the President of Honduras, it would be the most important day of her life. She would ask him, "If I was your daughter, what would things be like for me? Would he mind that I can never study, that I am not allowed to educate myself, that I am not allowed to work? Would he agree and be happy with what the police can do to my life, that they could take my life away? That's what I would ask him."

Elkyn Suárez would like to see Honduras become a country free of restrictions; a country with one education system, one health system and one legal system for all; a country with laws that exclude neither the rich nor the poor nor lesbians, gay men, bisexual and transgender people; a country where everyone receives equal treatment, especially with regard to legislation and the performance of the police.

"We all, men and women, should be given the chance to speak and to listen and to be heard. A lot of work needs to be done so that, like any other organization, the [San Pedro] Gay Community can be just another organization working for the right to life, the right to health, the right to education, to be free. While, through its laws, the government grants freedom to many people, it keeps us imprisoned, because that is the life men and women are living in Honduras, they are in a prison."