“Lesbians didn’t initially have a space within Kyrgyzstan’s gay rights movement,” observed Anna Kirey, co-founder and past executive director of Labrys, a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) organization in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Kirey noted that the first LGBT group in Kyrgyzstan was dominated by ethnically Russian gay men who focused on HIV prevention and organizing social events. “Basically it was discos and condoms,” Kirey said, “a classic post-Soviet LGBT NGO.”

Labrys was founded in 2004 in response to the needs of the lesbian and transgender community in Bishkek—Kirey, who spent the fall semester auditing classes in the Human Rights Advocate Program at the Center for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University, currently serves as its senior advisor. She appeared at the Harriman Institute in early December 2009 to discuss lesbian and transgender rights in Kyrgyzstan.

“Labrys emerged after an incident at a birthday party in February 2004,” recounted Kirey. “There were 13 lesbians and a gay man sitting in a café—a lesbian couple kissed and was told by the waitress that it wasn’t a brothel and they had to leave.” The party’s attendees were mostly students at the American University of Central Asia, where Kirey herself had been a student. “Because they studied in a democratic bubble, they felt motivated towards action.” Kirey explained that most people in Kyrgyzstan would not have considered challenging the norm, but AUCA students had grown used to a more western way of thinking.

Initially the group wanted to take the matter to court—they even went to a legal clinic in Bishkek for advice on how to handle the case—but in order to litigate, one had to go public. “No one wanted to be visible, so turning to the media and the courts was out of the question.” As a result, the incident never came to trial, but by late spring of 2004 a 40-person email list emerged. This was the foundation for Labrys, which later gained its momentum through foreign funding from organizations such as the Dutch NGO “Mama Cash.”

The Labrys office opened in January 2005—an unfurnished apartment that became a community space for the lesbian and transgender community in Bishkek. “People dropped in and out—they brought flowers, curtains, trash cans.” With community contributions the place acquired furniture and became a meeting locale. “Once there was a separate place for lesbian women it became extremely popular—you could come and be yourself. The main uniting idea was a safe space where you could kiss your girlfriend and be somewhat in public—since you could not kiss on the street.”

The founders of Labrys had set out to create an activist organization, but they quickly realized that they were not prepared. “It wasn’t possible for us to be activists until we had a group of people knowledgeable about the issues we faced.” Before they could tackle problems such as employment discrimination—many “butch” women have trouble getting hired unless they take to feminine dress—Labrys founders had to acclimate people to being part of an LGBT community at all.

Kirey noted that very few people are out of the closet in Kyrgyzstan. They tend to shy away from using the term “gay” or “lesbian” to identify themselves because of the stigma attached—“Some people use the Russian word tema, which means topic, Labrys is a temnaya organizatsiya.” Kirey chuckled; pointing out that temnaya means dark. “Others call the LGBT community nashi, or ‘ours.’”

Kyrgyzstan is a conservative, traditionally Muslim society where family is pivotal, and being “out” to family members is nearly impossible. “There are so many consequences to being ‘out,’ that people don’t usually do it. Life centers on family events—weddings, funerals, on Thursdays you cook plov together, families help out with financial problems—if you lose your family, you lose everything.”

Kirey indicated that out of 400 members of Labrys less than 30 are out to their families. She added that there are some accepting families, but they are usually ethnic Russian or Korean—“it is
almost unheard of for Kyrgyz families to be accepting of LGBT lifestyles.”

Because hiding their sexuality is taxing, many members of the LGBT community in Kyrgyzstan distance themselves. “If you are not married by 25 you constantly face scrutiny—it’s easier to just move away than to rebuff inquiries about your personal life.” People move to Bishkek—a metropolis—which is more conducive to an LGBT lifestyle than small villages.

“When we opened the Labrys office we realized that a number of people had no place to stay because they had been disowned or had run away from their families,” noted Kirey. “It is very difficult to rent an apartment in Bishkek—especially for a woman—at least half, sometimes more of your income goes to rent.” As a result many community members stayed in the office when it first opened. Kirey wistfully recalls the time when Labrys was less formal. “We had couples sitting on couches, talking and drinking tea. I miss those times, when it was very much fun, when it was mostly just friends.” As the organization grew, it transformed from a casual meeting space to an office space.

Labrys is a young organization—the ages of its members range from 19-59, but most are between 20 and 30. “When visiting the West, our members have been shocked to meet activists in their 50s and 60s—you don’t really see many LGBT people of that age in Kyrgyzstan.” Kirey explained that while older generations of LGBT people exist in Kyrgyzstan, they are not ready to be “out” or associated with an organization. “They come to the resource center and get books and videos, but don’t involve themselves much beyond information support.” Kirey described how the older LGBT generations often challenged the younger ones—they say we are too radical, too young to understand the realities.”

Initially Labrys did not want to register with the government as an LGBT organization. “We felt that we would not go anywhere if we were associated with LGBT so we registered in 2006 as a ‘Public Association for the Protection of Vulnerable Groups of Women.’” Two years ago Labrys members decided that they were ready to test the government and apply for LGBT status. “Unfortunately, in order to register an organization, the government requires a list of members with names and addresses, and we couldn’t muster enough people willing to give their names to the government in association with an LGBT cause.”

Kirey laments people’s hesitancy to reveal their names. “After years of work I am surprised that members still fear their name being on a list, even if it is pretty clear that there won’t be consequences.” The list is only for government eyes and would not be publicized. Kirey speculates that fear of the government is left over from the Soviet era, “when everyone was out to get you.” She feels that the government has more important things to do than to go after LGBT people.

Aside from being a lesbian organization, Labrys devotes a lot of effort to helping the transgender community. “We started working on transgender issues because of demand, it was never about political correctness, it came naturally—two of our founders came out as trans within six months of each other. We like to respond to the needs of the community we work with,” stated Kirey.

In December 2005 a group of transgender people formed a support group to discuss what kinds of services they wanted access to—Kirey was a part of this group. “I was worried that people would start taking hormones unsupervised because it is fairly easy to get access to hormones and all of the information on what to take and how to do it is available on the internet.” Kirey set out to find a doctor who would be able to monitor the transition process. “Every clinic we went to denied us.” Private clinics administered all kinds of tests and then told the patients what they already knew—that they were biologically female.

After months of searching, one of the group’s members said that he “couldn’t take it anymore” and went out to get hormones. “This was summer of 2006, after the first person did it we had a wave—there were four people taking hormones, following instructions that they found on Russian language websites.” Labrys members documented the situations in a Human Rights Watch report. “We used the report to pressure the Kyrgyz government into acknowledging that there are people who need hormone and medical treatment,” stated Kirey.

“For the past two years we have been working with medical specialists and training them on LGBT identity—on sensitization and on administering hormones. Now we have an endocrinologist who monitors gender transitions.” This endocrinologist was shocked that transgender people had no access to surgeries. He knew a surgeon who performed mastectomies and arranged for them to perform surgeries on transgender men. The first surgeries occurred in March this year.

Kirey marveled that transgender people in Kyrgyzstan are not as stigmatized as those who identify as LGB. “Most likely this is because it is a diagnosis, it is seen as a mistake of nature—you correct the mistake and your child is fine.” Kirey
commented that while a lot of transmen who are part of Labrys initially lost touch with their families, and some even faced violence, all of them are now back in touch.

Kyrgyzstan is among the most liberal countries in Central Asia—although Kirey noted that if anything, the Kyrgyz government has become more tyrannical since the Tulip Revolution in 2006. Kazakhstan is the only other Central Asian country to have an organization like Labrys. The more oppressive regimes in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan criminalize alternative sexual identities. Labrys conducts informational trainings for LGBT people from other Central Asian countries, but outreach is difficult.

Kirey recounted efforts to connect with lesbians in Tajikistan—“We only had one contact, a lesbian who was so scared that we would ‘out’ her that it took us an entire year to persuade her to come to a training session. She finally came and was so happy to gain access to new information and meet other LGBT people.” In Tajikistan the only other LGBT person she knew was her girlfriend. “Lesbians in countries where they have no means of organizing usually meet one another through sports teams and online fan clubs of Russian lesbian bands, like The Night Snipers and Zemfira,” explained Kirey.

Most LGBT organizations in Central Asia obtain funding from HIV prevention projects. Kirey commented that Labrys gets a lot of its funding from The Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation (Hivos), which is very active in Central Asia. “They have an HIV program, but we are not part of it because we are cautious of associating LGBT rights with a disease—we are stigmatized enough as it is.” Labrys focuses on providing shelter, “which is more holistic than focusing on condoms. From an HIV point of view, it’s better to have people with HIV in shelters than on the street.”

Recently there has been a lot of funding from mainstream organizations for LGBT rights in Central Asia. The help is welcome but Kirey voiced concern that the information coming from mainstream organizations “tends to define our space and can often be pathologized—we have a legal clinic now, but they are still using old terms like ‘homosexualism’ and medical terms about LGBT identities.” She reasoned that ultimately it is best when LGBT people organize first and then reach out to mainstream organizations for funding “rather than the other way around.”

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner